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ROWE, YOUR NEXT STOP IS FELONY COURT...THEN THE GRAND JURY

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A RAZOR! SURE!

I'M TAKING HER TO THE TRAIN..SHE'S A PIP

WHAT A QUICK, SMOOTH SHAVE. YOU'VE GOT A MIGHTY KEEN BLADE HERE!

IT'S A THIN GILLETTE AND I'VE USED IT PLENTY TOO!

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SEVEN SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME FORTY OCTOBER, 1946 NUMBER ONE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Seven Complete Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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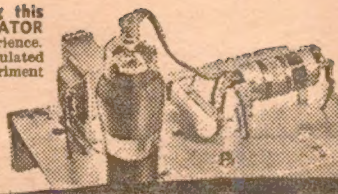

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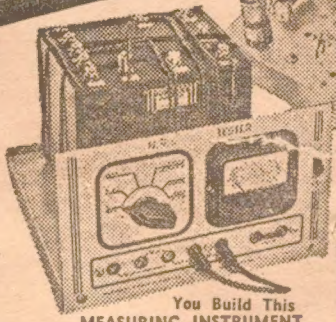

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★ The Branding Corral ★

Conducted by Strawboss

SEVERAL months back a number of gents lit down in the *Branding Corral* and got to chewing the fat about Sam Bass, famous in song and legend. Many yarns have been spun about Sam, some hinting he wasn't much good, and as many others telling he was a real man to ride the river with. Anyhow, J. F. Yandell, of Casa Grande, Arizona, has a tale to tell about the man who died at Round Rock.

Dear Strawboss:

I've just finished an article about Sam Bass in *Star Western* Magazine, so I'd like to recount a yarn about Bass that a friend of mine told me he witnessed.

A gent I'll call Berry M. was sheriff of Stephens County, Texas, of which Breckinridge is the county seat. Berry was a fat-whiskered sheriff of the linen duster type. That is, he wore a linen duster coat, similar to a cowboy slicker, only it was white.

Bass and about a dozen of his gang were camped in the southwest corner of Stephens County, twenty miles, more or less, from Breckinridge. A man I'll call Oscar was on a small farm near where Bass was camped. Bass and his men came to the house and bought eggs and butter from Oscar's wife. They frankly told Oscar who they were.

Bass and his boys stayed in camp a week or longer, and Sheriff Linen Duster Berry learned where they were and decided to come and arrest them. Bass found out the morning Berry was coming so he prepared to welcome the posse.

There was a small, flat valley with a dry gulch passing through it in the neighborhood of Oscar's farm. There was about a two-foot-high bank on one side with level grass beyond. So, when Berry and the posse, about fifty strong, came into the valley below, Bass and his gang rode their horses to this two-foot-high bank, with their backs to Berry's posse, which was about fifty yards away.

The posse was bunched up and Berry, riding a white horse, was out in front, giving instructions. Bass waited until the posse was ready to charge, with Berry in his white duster and mounted on a white horse in front. Then Bass yelled, each Bass man jerked out two pistols and began firing into the air.

At the first burst of pistol fire, Berry's heart failed him. He whirled his hoss and rushed away, with the posse after him. Sam's gang's pistol firing kept up till the posse passed around a hill and out of sight, One lone man did not follow, but just sat on his horse.

Sam and his gang rushed to him and closed around in a circle. Oscar, the farmer, with a friend, had been in the brush on the hillside to watch the "battle" and so ran up in time to see and recognize the fellow who did not run. Bass asked the lone man what he was doing there.

"Well," the gent replied, "I came here to help arrest you fellows, but it seems I'm left in the weeds."

Bass: "What are you going to do about it?"

The man said, "I'm going back home, harness this horse, hitch him to my double shovel plow and start plowing my young corn."

Bass: "Suppose we tell you that you can't go back?"

"I don't think you will tell me that," the man said.

Bass: "Say, fellow, I would like to have you jine up with us."

He: "Mister, I have a home, a very pretty wife and two children, one five years old and one, two. I own our home and farm and am making an honest living and have no intention of leaving it.

Bass: "Say, you are about as cool a fellow as I ever saw in my life. Ain't you scared of us?"

He: "No, I'm not scared of you, so if you are through talking to me, I'll be going."

Bass: "Just wait a minute."

Bass talked to his men, then he and two others walked their horses to the man and offered him three twenty-dollar gold pieces.

He: "What is this for"

Bass: "It is our offering of respect to a brave man. Take the sixty dollars and remember that even a robber has a spark of humanity. Now you may go."

Bass left his camp that day and went to the town where he was killed less than a week later.

Sorry, pards, but we're kinda shy on rope-swingin' room this month, so we gotta knock off here. Hope to see you all next month in the November issue.

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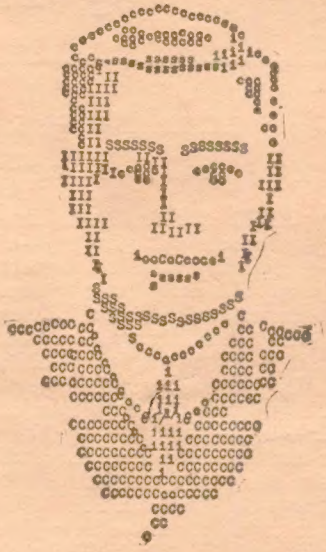

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TEXAS LAW DIES IN KANSAS!

Smashing Novel of Hell-Roaring Delano

By Thomas Thompson

CHAPTER ONE

New Law for Old?

AFTER the death sentence was passed the rest was phantasy—a filmy thing that was present and yet not real. The jurymen who had just condemned an innocent man to hang whooped as they ran toward the court house door, heading across the Arkansas River toward Wichita's hell-town and Van Heflin's free whiskey.

Terry McCoy, the defense attorney, saw their faces as they raced by him and he knew then that he would never forget them. Cass St. Vrain, the jury foreman. Tim Beckett—Reb Collom—Gab Vollette. . . . The rest did not matter much, for those four, backed by Van Heflin and his Slash V bunch, had been enough to condemn Ham Sheppard, the nester, to death. He should have known, Terry McCoy told himself.

A shudder that was born of anger and disgust ran through McCoy's slight frame. If he were truthful with himself the verdict was no surprise. Even while he told himself that justice would win, he had been expecting this. Perhaps what really hurt now was the fact that he must admit he had been a fool. A fool for trading a pair of sixguns for a law book. A fool for falling in love with a girl like Valerie Sheppard. The judge hurried past, tugging his fat arms into his coat sleeves. Yes, there would be drinks for the judge, too, in that hell town called Delano across the river.

* * *

He had come up from Texas with a trail herd, this Terry McCoy, and he had come with a man-sized thirst riding a bronc with cactus in his belly. Men called him Half Pint, and he took the name with a grin for they spoke it with respect in their voices. There was the bright eye of danger about the little five foot four waddie who came from the wilds of Arizona and thought like the Mojave Indians who had raised him.

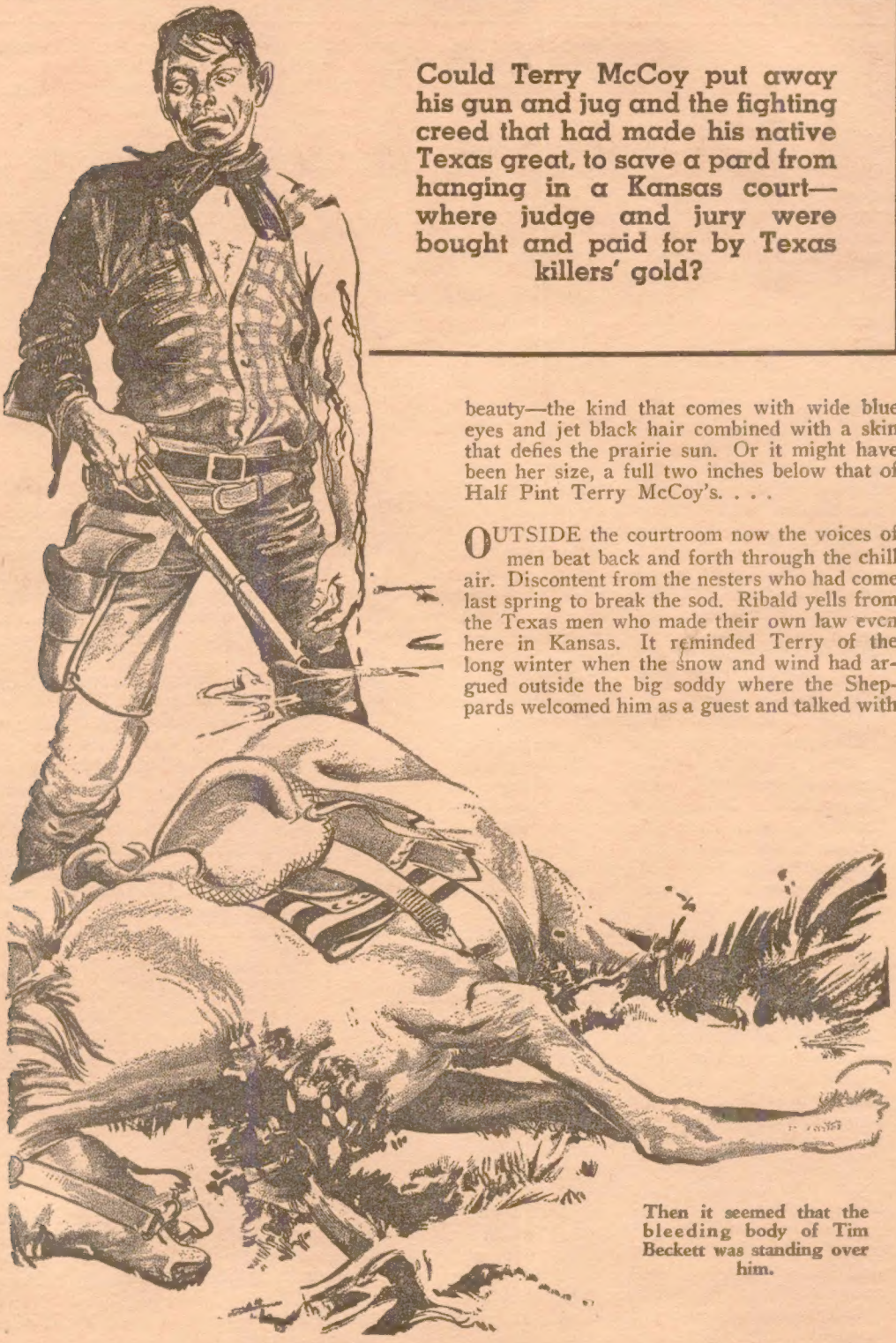
The first marshals shrugged and turned their backs when he emptied his twin Walkers and clipped the ornate wooden balls from the sign above the Bull Head. He was a man who took his hell in big doses, yet kept a certain Indian-like dignity about him. Half Pint Terry McCoy had been a welcome addition to Wichita, for he gambled freely and spent with both hands. Then he met Valerie Sheppard.

The rains had come early that year and the bite of northern sleet was in the wind. The herds piled up on the prairie and the prices piled down and those able to last it out spread the mottled longhorns across the cured prairie grass and howled the discontent of their enforced stay through the reeking streets of Wichita's hell inspired neighbor, Delano. But these misplaced malcontents saw less and less of Half Pint Terry McCoy, and they spoke about it often—first with worry and respect—lately with the coarse jokes of men who jibe at one gone 'girlin'.

Standing here in the empty courtroom now after his first law case, Terry McCoy remembered that first day. It was the third day of the rain, and the streets were knee deep swirls of liquid mud. She had stood on the corner, the hem of her skirt lifted above her ankle.

It might have been her natural unspoiled

Could Terry McCoy put away his gun and jug and the fighting creed that had made his native Texas great, to save a pard from hanging in a Kansas court—where judge and jury were bought and paid for by Texas killers' gold?



Then it seemed that the bleeding body of Tim Beckett was standing over him.

beauty—the kind that comes with wide blue eyes and jet black hair combined with a skin that defies the prairie sun. Or it might have been her size, a full two inches below that of Half Pint Terry McCoy's. . . .

OUTSIDE the courtroom now the voices of men beat back and forth through the chill air. Discontent from the nesters who had come last spring to break the sod. Ribald yells from the Texas men who made their own law even here in Kansas. It reminded Terry of the long winter when the snow and wind had argued outside the big soddy where the Sheppards welcomed him as a guest and talked with

longing of Ohio and things that Terry had never known. He had countered with his dream-like stories of Arizona and the legends of the Mojaves he knew as well as if he had been an Indian himself.

He had dropped the name of Half Pint now, for it was coupled with a turbulent past. Besides, he liked the shine of Valerie's eyes across the fire and the shape of her lips when she spoke his real name. And he found he could argue without guns. Ham Sheppard, the girl's uncle, had taught him that.

Ham Sheppard was a rangy man who spoke with a voice so soft that his listener had to lean to catch his words. And he spoke words that were worth leaning. Sheppard was a strange man in that he could plow more sod than three men and still have time for the books that filled one wall—books for which Valerie's mother spent her scant store of spare moments making covers out of calico. Books that formed a gap between Valerie Sheppard and Terry McCoy. But Terry McCoy took the bit in his teeth and crossed that gap.

He had a capacity for knowledge that matched his former capacity for forty-rod and trouble, and he read with the eye of a cowman reading the country. No landmark was forgotten, and a cow once seen was remembered. Such was his memory with books. Quote him a line and he would name the volume and the page. And it was natural that the law books held his interest, for here was conflict.

Changes came that winter. Valerie Sheppard's dad saw an opportunity to buy a small hardware store, and he took the chance over the protests of Ham, his brother. It was better for the women to live in town, Valerie's dad said, and they moved in, leaving Ham Sheppard with the soddy and his books and his teaching of Terry McCoy. And Terry McCoy changed, too.

It was not a sudden thing, but rather a gradual gathering like summer clouds on the peaks. When his work on the holding grounds interfered with his studies he quit his outfit. He used his gun for the last time that night, to get the pay that was due him from a boss who hated to part with money. And when at last he swayed to Ham Sheppard's argument that a land without formal law was a land lost before it was gained, Terry McCoy rented an office and hung out a shingle.

He had passed no bar examination, for formalities had not grown that strong within Terry McCoy. The kiss and the hint of tears in the eyes of Valerie Sheppard had been enough to tell him he had taken the right road, and the handclasp of her dad told him he was accepted. Ham Sheppard had little to say.

But as the winter set down and the longhorns drifted unchecked and cropped the grass with the thoroughness of grasshoppers, Terry wondered. There were murmurs of protest from the settlers, and talk of the new barbed wire. But the merchants, including Valerie's dad who had turned from his land to grow fat on Texas dollars, scoffed and said the spring would move them on. Then Van Heflin had driven north with his two thousand Slash Vs, looking for grass and trouble.

And now Ham Sheppard, quiet, soft spoken, still clinging to his share of the land and living with his dreams, had killed a Slash V steer that crashed through a flimsy fence to gorge itself on winter wheat. And later a dead man was found in the trampled grain. That dead man was a tinhorn gambler, shot in back of the Bull Head and dragged to Ham Sheppard's field. Terry McCoy, the lawyer, had proven it. But the verdict was guilty, and Ham Sheppard would hang. . . .

* * *

Slowly, Terry McCoy picked up his papers and left the empty courtroom. A swirl of cold wind and dust blinded him and he did not see Van Heflin until he was a foot from him. The cattleman drew the unlighted cigar from his mouth with a sucking sound. "Satisfied, Half Pint?" he said softly. "I could use a good man."

"You paid the jury, Van," Terry said dully. "You paid every damn man."

"That's right," Van Heflin said. "I'll keep on payin' 'em, Half Pint. My cows have got to eat. You're a cowman, Half Pint, and you know what I say is right. Why don't you go back to the old way? We boys liked you that way."

Terry McCoy looked at the cattleman a long time. He spoke thoughtfully, deliberately. "Maybe you're right, Van," he said. His voice was soft, like Ham Sheppard's voice. "Maybe I'll go back to the old way."

CHAPTER TWO

Trail Back

VALERIE SHEPPARD was waiting for him at the hotel. It was like a bucket of cold water in the face of a man who has been on a two week drunk seeing her there, and Terry McCoy stumbled over his words. "I told you not to come to the trial," he accused, and his voice was sharp.

"You did your best, Terry," she whispered. "We'll force a retrial. Uncle has friends. Perhaps the merchants—"

"The merchants like Texas money," Terry said flatly.

She started to argue—softly, gently, like her uncle who now sat with his head in his hands on the oak bench of the Wichita jail and in

her argument Terry McCoy found no solace. When she put her hand on his arm he shook it off roughly and turned on her, his eyes blazing.

"Talk," he said bitterly. "We talk when we ought to be shooting. I sit on my hands and become an *alyah*. That's it, a damn dirty *alyah!*" It was the first time he had cursed in front of her but rather than shocking him to his senses he seemed to draw power from it. He grasped her roughly by both arms and held her close.

"You know what an *alyah* is? It's a Mojave Injun that plays the part of a woman. Some squaw don't want to lose her only son so she dresses him like a woman—teaches him to sit like a woman. Then when he has the dreams that will shape his life he dreams he's wearing a skirt in Mutavilya's house. So he dresses like a woman and instead of going out to fight like a man he becomes an *alyah* to beller and squall at funerals. That's what I've become—an *alyah* at the funeral of Ham Sheppard when I should have been out fighting!" The violence was out of him now and he released her, his hands trembling. She stepped back, afraid of the thing she had seen in this man she loved.

"You feel I've done that to you?" she asked. There was hurt fear in her voice. He tried to repair the damage he had done.

"Maybe Wichita ain't ready for our kind of law, Valerie," he said softly. "It takes time."

At that moment there was no doubt in his mind as to what his future plans would be. He had tried the soft-spoken way of old women and it had failed. There was only one other course. He must try to explain to Valerie, so he used an Indian analogy, for she had always loved to listen to the tales he told of the far-off Mojaves who since the First Times had been the power from the scorching heat of Arizona to the coolness of the Big Sea.

"They had a justice, those Mojaves," he told her. "It was strength, and that's what we're faced with now. Van Heflin is matching his strength against ours. If we were Mojaves we'd pick up the clubs that had made us strong since the First Times and we'd talk to Van Heflin in the only language he understands."

She knew what he was trying to tell her and her lips formed a silent "no." She understood the struggle within him, for she loved him, and she did not want to see him go back to lose the things he had gained.

"We'll keep trying our way," she said.

"They'll hang him in a day!" Terry exploded. "What can we do in a day?"

"They wouldn't do that," she said. "It would be inhuman."

SHE hadn't meant to say anything to rile him, and even now it was not the words she used but the way in which she said them. It was that complete refusal to accept reality and believe the worst of men. In Ohio the law did such and such and men reacted so and so. And so it followed that here in Kansas the same must be true. Men were the same everywhere. It was the one thing about her that fanned his temper, and coming as it did now, right when the law he had learned had been bought out from under him it was all that was needed to turn him. He said, "You go on home and stay there. I'll come later and tell you how it is."

"Please, Terry," she pleaded, clutching his shirt front. "That's all over now. You promised me, Terry."

He pushed her aside, gently. For a second he stood there, looking down into her eyes, bright with tears. Then he said, "It's bad enough to be a small man, Val. You'd hate me if I turned out to be a little one."

She pleaded, and she ran up the first flight of stairs, following him. But he turned his back on her and went on down the hall to his room. In that moment he had changed back. Changed back to that hell raising half-pint who had come up the trail with the soul of a Mojave clubber, daring any man to stand in his way. And when he came out of his room she was gone. He was glad, for he had downed a quart of whiskey and he had a pair of guns around his middle. He had never wanted her to see him this way.

There was a hitch to his walk as he crossed the street. It was not a swagger; neither was it a lurch from the effects of whiskey, for when Half Pint McCoy was mad a quart did little more than whet his senses. But he walked with a roll, like a man accustomed to high heels and much riding, and his weight seemed to light on the balls of his feet. He pushed open the door of the hardware store and nodded a curt greeting to Valerie's father.

Caleb Sheppard waited a full minute before answering. He had made it his business to know this boy who had won his daughter's love. When the merchant spoke he did so over his shoulder as he reached up and straightened things on the high shelves.

"You did well at the trial, Terry," Caleb Sheppard said. "You've got things rolling now so we can whip this thing right."

"Paper loads. Forty-fives," Terry McCoy said.

"There's always a lot of confusion at first," Caleb said, still not looking back. "The Texans don't understand us and I guess we don't understand them. But we need each other, Terry. They need our railroad and we need their money. That's all it takes, Terry—that needing each other. Then men can sit down and argue things out peaceful."

"And a box of caps," Terry McCoy said.

Caleb Sheppard turned suddenly, his hands

on the counter. His face was white and there were lines of silver perspiration down each sunken cheek. "Terry, you're a fool if you go across to Delano feeling the way you do. Get 'em mad and they'll rip the town apart. They're satisfied now. While they're in a good mood we'll reason with them."

"While you reason with them they'll hang your brother just to see him kick," Terry McCoy said. "You gonna sell me that stuff?"

"I won't be a party to murder," Caleb Sheppard said.

Terry McCoy reached across the counter and took the storekeeper by the collar. With a quick shove he sent Sheppard staggering, clutching at the shelves to keep from falling. Vaulting over the counter Terry picked out the items he wanted, walked out on the sidewalk and in front of everyone started loading his guns. When he was finished he fired each one once, reloaded the empty chamber, and started toward the toll-bridge that crossed the river.

The street was empty except for the swirls of dust. A buckboard team had shied and reared when he fired those two shots. It pleased him. There was power and strength in a rearing team. He did not stop as he made a practice draw. Satisfied, he crossed by the whitewashed shipping pens, cut down the street toward the Arkansas and crossed to Hell Town where the Texas men drank to their victory.

CHAPTER THREE

Bought-and Paid-for Judge

DELANO was earning its name of Hell Town that night. The Texans, fired by the victory they had won in the courtroom, slapped one another on the back and drank their health in the Bull Head. They made no secret of the fact that they were pleased about the outcome of the trial, and they made no secret of how that outcome had been brought about.

"The nesters will have to learn," someone said. "The sod is for cows."

The pasty-faced little piano player gulped his drink and started flicking the fingers of his right hand against the keys. He cocked his bird-like head to one side, added the bass notes, and then with a grin that split his face and exposed his buck teeth he began to sing:

"The sod is for cows,
It ain't for plows. . . ."

The men at the bar caught the words, nodded to the rhythm, then blasted the chorus, and the piano player blossomed under their acceptance of his song and made gurgling sounds deep in his throat as he eyed the stacked drinks that jiggled across the top of his instrument. It was then Half Pint Terry McCoy came in off the street.

The piano player stopped in the middle of a bar and suddenly remembered he had business elsewhere. He paused long enough to gulp three drinks before heading for the back door. Van Heflin and the Texas men turned slowly and saw Half Pint standing there in the door, his thumbs hooked carelessly in his gun-belt. It was Van Heflin who spoke.

"Comin' back to Texas, Half Pint?" he asked.

"In a way," Half Pint said. He walked on over to the bar.

He knew every man in that room, had ridden with most of them when they had come up the trail 'totin' stars on their duds', as was said of the Lone Star men. He called them by name, one by one, and he motioned for a bottle. Over his first drink he singled out Cass St. Vrain, who had been foreman of the jury. Then his eyes found the others: Tim Beckett—Reb Collom—Gab Vollette. He tipped his glass toward them and said, "To a bunch of skunks!"

They took it, not knowing for sure whether this was a challenge or a revival of the old Half Pint Terry McCoy. Only Gab Vollette said anything. He talked a lot anyway. It was the way he had earned his name. He said, "Welcome home to Texas."

Terry said, "If Texas has got to where it's payin' its juries, I don't want no part of it."

Van Heflin kept setting his glass against the polished bar and picking it up again, making links out of the wet circles it left. He didn't look up when he said, "It ain't easy bringin' two thousand head of mossy horns up that trail, Half Pint. A man hates to see 'em starve once they get here."

"A man could make a deal to graze 'em," Terry said, downing his drink. "Some of the nesters ain't got more than four logs laid out markin' their claim. They'd be glad to sell graze."

Van Heflin said, "Recollect how in Texas we figger if there ain't no fence a cow can graze as far as she can walk from water."

"This ain't Texas," Terry said. He had turned his back to the bar now and had his heel hooked over the brass rail. His elbows rested on the bar top and his hands dangled loosely. "If it was Texas," he said, "you wouldn't get away with hangin' an innocent man." He saw Gab Vollette pushing some of the others aside.

"Maybe we think he's guilty," Gab Vollette said.

"You ain't got sense enough to think, Gab," Terry said softly. "You'd sell your own mother for a few dollars. Your side-kicks ain't any better."

Terry let his eyes run over the big drover.

He was thick-set and wore a muff of beard around his face. There was a shifty quality about the man but it was known he was no coward. His favorite pastime was to go into a bar where he was not known, offer to whip any man in the place, back them all into a corner, then buy drinks for the house. It was his idea of a good time. He said, "When did you start bein' God, Half Pint?"

"I'm a lawyer," Terry said softly. "It's for me to try and get justice done."

"You didn't used to have to study books to get what you wanted out of a girl," Vollette said.

It was a fatal statement and everyone in the place knew it. Perhaps Van Heflin would have stopped it if he could have done it gracefully, but it was too late. They had already seen the tight-lipped grin on Terry's face. He leaned forward slightly and one elbow seemed to accidentally slip from the bar.

"I'd kill you for that alone," Terry said softly. "But I'd figgered on gettin' you before you ever said it."

"That's a lot of talk for an Injun lover," Gab Vollette said. The men moved back.

GAB VOLLETTE had stood there, feet apart, up until now. Before he finished speaking his body twisted and his right hand swept down. His gun had cleared the holster when Half Pint Terry McCoy cut loose with the heavy Walker. Gab Vollette fired twice, into the floor. He kept looking at his gun as if it had suddenly become too heavy to lift. Then he fell. Fell hard, with his face against the floor. Terry McCoy did not holster his smoking Colt.

"The rest of you better go convince the judge you was wrong today," Terry said softly. "If you don't, I aim to gun you down, one by one. Want me to call your names?"

Van Heflin stepped in. He said, "You better go sober up, Half Pint. You come here lookin' for trouble and you've had it. There's a lot of Texas boys in town won't like it."

"Your name is on that list, Van," Terry said easily.

"Maybe me and the boys ought to wear guns when we cross the river to your side of town," Van Heflin said.

Terry tipped a drink with his left hand. "Come on over any time," he said.

He backed toward the door then, holding his gun in front of him. Once outside he turned quickly and headed up the street, keeping to the shadows, hurrying across the open spaces between buildings. He got back to the main part of Wichita and found several of the merchants in the hotel lobby. Without waiting for their questions he said, "I been over to Delano. Big time there tonight."

"We heard shooting," Caleb Sheppard said. He kept twisting his large hands together.

"Yeah," Terry drawled. "So did I. Maybe you best get out your rifles and shotguns."

"Now see here, McCoy," Spiegle, the butcher said, jabbing his fat thumb against Terry's chest. "We didn't object when you decided to set up a law office. Fact is we was glad to see you and we took you in as one of us. But if you're going to use that to carry on personal fights and turn the cattlemen against the town."

"Ham Sheppard is innocent," Terry said doggedly.

"We know that," O'Melveny, the blacksmith, said. "We'll see to it that no harm comes to him."

"Uh huh," Terry said. "They'll hang him while we're talking, but we'll figger out something." He touched the two guns at his hips. "Those boys across the river respect this kind of talk," he said.

"Well, if you won't listen to us, will you listen to Valerie?" It was Caleb Sheppard. Her name struck a blow to Terry's middle and he turned and saw her standing there at the back of the lobby. Her face was white and her eyes were red with weeping. Her mother was with her. The two women came forward to meet him and Valerie took one of his hands in both of hers.

"Please listen, Terry," she said.

"Can't you see I'm trying to save your uncle from being hanged?" he asked desperately. It was a constant puzzle to him—how people as good as the Sheppards—people who in ways were so brilliant—could be so blind to the facts around them.

"But it's all right, Terry," Valerie said. "We've talked to the judge. He's promised to stay execution a week so that you can have time to gather more evidence."

"How much did you pay him for that?" Terry said. Valerie flushed and there was an uneasy shifting among the men. When he got no direct answer to that Terry asked, "Where is the judge now?"

"Over home, I guess," O'Melveny said uneasily.

"Over in Delano getting drunk," Terry corrected.

They didn't argue, for a sudden burst of pistol shots followed by yells came from across the river. Terry stepped out onto the hotel porch and the others followed. Valerie had pressed close to his side and she still held onto his hand.

OVER the tollbridge they could see the Texas men heading toward Douglas Street and the center of Wichita. Out in the lead a couple of men held both arms of the judge, and they helped him along with a knee in the back when he tried to hold back. Van Heflin

kept to one side, slightly back of the two men with the judge. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Terry caught a slight movement down near the end of the hotel porch. With a quick jerk he freed himself of Valerie's grasp and with his arm he sent her crashing against the wall of the hotel. Never slowing the movement his hand dipped to his holster, drew his gun and fired twice.

Reb Collom got up from his hiding place there at the end of the porch. He made a couple of feeble passes with his arms, then turned and fell. One hand was still visible, sticking up over the edge of the porch. With a choked scream Valerie was in Terry's arms.

He held her close for a second—felt her heart beating against his. Then slowly she pushed herself away from him as he lowered his head to kiss her. Her face was drained of color and her eyes were wide. She whispered the words, *"Terry! You're drunk!"*

At first it startled him, for the shock of Reb Collom's nearly successful ambush was still prickling his spine. Then it angered him to think that she would think of that when he had been inches from death.

"You started this because you wanted to—because you enjoy killing and you had been peaceful as long as you could stand it. You're like the Indians you're always talking about!"

She seemed to be another person standing there. He had never seen the look that was on her face—never heard her voice a forced whisper like that. It was as if she had suddenly become a person he had never met, and he turned his back on her. The Texas men had stopped at the flurry of gunfire. Now they came on, relentless as death. When they were a half block away they stopped and Van Heflin called out.

"The judge has changed his mind about puttin' off the hangin'," the Texan said. "He's decided it would be better all the way around if we went ahead with it right now. Ain't that what you said, Judge?"

They could hear a squeal of pain from the judge, then his voice, shaky with fear. "That's what I said."

The men on the porch stood dumbfounded. One or two started to protest. Terry McCoy looked them over and scoffed in their faces. Valerie Sheppard seemed to have recovered from her hypnotic trance and she came forward now and spoke to him. "Terry, I didn't know what I was saying. I had never seen a man killed before. It is all so cold—so merciless." She hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

"I guess you and me don't understand each other, Val," Terry said. He pushed her aside roughly. Snaking out both guns he started a broken run for the jail up at the end of the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

Time to Hang!

AT FIRST he thought they were going to let him get away, but a bullet that hit the dust between his feet and ricocheted in front of him changed his mind. He half whirled to answer the shot and saw that the Texans and the townspeople were bunched now in front of the hotel. Out to one side he recognized the form of Tim Beckett bending over the dead body of Reb Collom. He remembered suddenly that Tim and Reb had been friends long before they teamed up to sell their jury votes.

He ducked behind the harness shop so that he could catch his breath before entering the frame jail that housed Ham Sheppard. During the breather Terry took time out to reload his guns, then with both guns drawn he stepped up on the low porch and kicked open the door. Ben Rathbone, the town marshal, and two of his policemen were sitting at the marshal's desk playing cards. Their sudden startled scraping of chairs ended in a grunt of surprise as they stared down the barrels of Terry McCoy's twin Walkers.

"There's trouble comin', Marshal," Terry said crisply. "I figure I couldn't talk to you freely." He pointed his chin, Indian fashion, toward the guns in his hands.

"You had your say in court today, McCoy," the marshal blustered. "We don't want no truck with you."

"As his lawyer I have a right to talk to the prisoner," Terry said. He said it mockingly, for the word law was beginning to be a sickening thing in his belly. He motioned the lawmen to their feet. "Get down those sawed-off scatter guns," he ordered. "Stand there in the door and try to act like you care whether they lynch your prisoner or not. I'll be right behind you with a couple of itchy fingers."

"Damn you, McCoy!" the marshal blustered. "I can run my jail without your help."

"Yeah, I know," Terry drawled. "But you're not gettin' paid extra for this job. I want you to hold off that mob!"

Over the marshal's shoulder he could see Heflin and his men moving slowly up the street. Two of them deployed long enough to lift a rail from the fence around the livery stable corral, then they came back and took their place with the marchers. He strained to see Valerie Sheppard, and when he couldn't find her he had a vague sense of relief, although he had told himself they were through. He then backed slowly toward the single cell where Ham Sheppard stood pressed against the bars of the door. From a hook on the wall he picked a ring of keys with the barrel of his left gun. With a deft twist of the wrist he slid them across the floor to the cell. "Reach out

and unlock that damn door," he demanded.

"Wait, Terry," Sheppard said in that soft voice of his. "Perhaps you haven't heard. Valerie was here a while ago and the judge—"

"Damn the judge!" Terry exploded. "There's a lynch mob coming up the street to stretch your neck. Are you going to stand there and preach or are you coming out?"

"Terry—" Ham Sheppard began.

"Yeah, I know," Terry said. "I'm drunk. I'm a ring-tailed roarer from Arizona and I kill to watch 'em kick. But get this, Sheppard. I got some Injun law of my own and it says they ain't gonna hang my first customer. Come out of there or I'll come in and get you!"

The key turned in the heavy lock and Ham Sheppard came out.

"Take a couple of those rifles in that rack by the door," Terry commanded. One of the town policemen made a sudden shift and Terry jabbed a Colt into his back. "I'm still here, son," Terry said softly.

"Damn you, McCoy," the marshal bellowed. "You can't get away with this, you hear?"

"Shut up," Terry snapped. "Step out there and pretend like you're an honest to God marshal for a change. Tell 'em if they come a step closer you'll blast their guts all over the street!" He stepped forward and gave the marshal a shove and as he did he cocked both guns. "Start talking!"

The marshal's argument did not sound very convincing, what with a six-shooter in his back, but he did plead with Van Heflin to turn back. He promised that the prisoner would be turned over in time for the hanging and Van Heflin called his bluff.

"It's time now, Marshal!" Van yelled. "Ain't that so, Judge?"

"That's so," the judge called, his words clipped short by the twist given his back-bent arm.

The marshal was stopped. He half turned to see Terry McCoy and he was whimpering when he asked for instructions. Terry had them for him. "You keep arguin'!" he snapped. "Hold 'em off another five minutes or I'll blow a hole through you I can put my foot through." He snapped another order for Ham Sheppard to hurry up with the rifles.

Sheppard, able to see the mob forming outside, had changed his attitude and was now moving with the same decision he showed when he handled a plow. He was a powerful man with a mind of his own, and had that mind been attuned to the violence of the situation Terry had no doubt the two of them could have raised plenty of hell with that lynch mob outside. But within the last few hours he had come to mistrust Ham Sheppard and anyone who catered to his way of thinking—and that, he grudgingly admitted included Valerie. They were a year ahead of their time here on the prairie. Sheppard was standing by, a rifle in either hand, waiting for the next move.

"Hit for that back door," Terry said. "Grab the first horse you come to and head south fast. I'll be right behind you."

It made no particular difference to him if the marshal heard his plans. In the first place he doubted if the marshal would have guts enough to follow. In the second place, once they were in Indian territory the marshal would have no jurisdiction. Ham Sheppard made no move to disobey but streaked for the door. Giving the marshal one final jab with the gun, Terry followed. He found Sheppard, already mounted, holding a second horse for him. "I told you to ride, you fool!" Terry said.

Ham Sheppard grinned. "I know some Indian law too," he said.

IT WAS a bad move from the start, Terry found, and as the winter months rolled on into early spring it became worse. That soft voice of Ham Sheppard's that had first taught him to argue without a gun now became a thing that rasped on his mind and kept him at a hair-trigger pitch. The ranch they worked on there in the Territory was a cockle burr outfit not worthy of the name and Terry watched the first herds heading north with a strange longing in his heart. He told himself it was a longing to get back to Texas—back with men he knew who fought with methods he knew. But at times he admitted it was because those herds were pointed toward Wichita.

Time and again he told Ham Sheppard not to try to send mail north, and time and again Sheppard disobeyed. "I'm not a criminal," the nester would say. "I'll find a way to go back a free man."

"You'll go back to the end of a rope," Terry told him, and his argument had logic enough to hold the nester to his job, although the misery within him was making him old. Then one day a letter came back.

Terry was at the supply store on Salt Fork when a bunch of Texas men, heading south, blew in. Terry, as usual, was slouched in a far corner, a bottle in his hand. One of the Texans threw a sack on the counter and fished through the greasy opening. "Know anybody name of Pierson?" he asked. He held up a letter and traced the name with his finger. "J. G. Pierson." Terry pushed the bottle aside and reached out and grabbed the letter.

"I know him," he snapped. "Lives up river a piece." It was the name Ham Sheppard had told his brother to use if he could send him mail. The Texan leered down at Terry.

"It wasn't gonna walk away," he said. "I would of give it to yuh. I packed it clean from Wichita."

"Yeah, sure," Terry said apologetically. "Just that I was expecting it, that's all."

"You J. G. Pierson?"

"I said I knew him, didn't I?"

The Texan grunted. "For a little gent you sure got a cussed streak in yuh." He called for whiskey and dropped it there. Terry stuffed the letter in his shirt and went outside. His eye had caught the familiar round letters of Valerie's hand and he was mad to think that they still meant something to him. He hurried on to get his horse, then stopped suddenly. Someone had ducked around the corner of the store and was standing there, watching him. A chill ran up his back. Dodging behind a wagon shed he stood there, trying to see. There was no one. Maybe this hiding out was getting him. . . .

He went back then and got his horse. Stepping into the saddle he headed up the creek toward the ranch where he and Ham Sheppard had worked all winter. The thaw had left the prairie a spongy mat and his horse's hoofs made no sound. He remembered that a horse, following on his trail, would make no sound, either.

Terry was half way back to the ranch before the idea that someone was following completely left him. He cut out of the cottonwoods that lined the creek then to take a short cut, and as he did lead whined by his ear and a rifle cracked from the brush. He tried to wheel his horse and another bullet caught the animal in the neck. The horse screamed, reared, then plunged like a maniac. Terry, trying to free his guns, lost his seat and hit the ground. Another bullet plowed the sod an inch from his face. He rolled and threw himself behind the dying horse.

For a full ten minutes he lay there, not making a move. Then a man on horseback came out of the cottonwoods down along the creek. One look told Terry who he was. There was no mistaking the lanky slouch of Tim Beckett, the dead Collom's partner.

In that second the thing he had tried to run away from came back to mock him. There, not a hundred yards away, was one of the jurors who had thrown the guilty verdict at Ham Sheppard. In his hand was a rifle carrying lead to avenge the gunsmoke death of Reb Collom.

Terry waited until the man had ridden a few yards closer, then he jumped to his feet and emptied one gun. He saw Tim Beckett jerk away from lead, saw him twist crazily in the saddle. But he also saw Tim Beckett raise his rifle.

After that there was no vision, as such. There was only pain and a screaming protest as lead ripped Terry's body. Then it seemed that the bleeding body of Tim Beckett was standing over him, the rifle muzzle inches from Terry's body. And the final blast had no pain in it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Chance Ranch

THE passing of time for Half Pint Terry McCoy was measured by the increasing age and discontent in the face of Ham Sheppard. The time was made bearable by Terry's rebellion within himself. His hatred for Tim Beckett and his hunger for revenge was the tonic that kept his blood flowing through those months of half-life, half-death.

The doctor they got from the Kansas side of the border was good, in his way, and there seemed to be some greater reason than the mere saving of a life that made the old man drive fifty miles to probe for lead.

Although Terry knew nothing about it, a transformation had taken place in this self-exiled doctor as time went by. And when Half Pint Terry McCoy was able to see what went on around him he didn't meet a frightened old man with the reek of whiskey about him. He met a self-assured surgeon who had a mania for speaking bluntly.

"You're alive now, damn ye," was the doctor's greeting. "You probably won't ever walk again, though."

With that cheerful ultimatum the doctor left. And Terry McCoy knew he would walk—in spite of hell and high water, the killing pain in his spine, and the diagnosis of a doctor. He'd walk. Tim Beckett was fast with a gun. A man would have to walk to kill Tim Beckett.

And he did walk. It took time—a lot of time—and every moment was weighted with hell that drove Terry McCoy deeper and deeper within himself until he hated not only Van Heflin and the jury he had bought but everyone else who had entered into that phase of his life.

Ham Sheppard talked some at first until Terry cursed the sound of his voice. Then Ham Sheppard became silent, and that silence was worse. And finally Sheppard became a tangible thing upon which Terry could hang his hatred.

There was never a sense of obligation hinged on the fact that Ham Sheppard had found him there on the prairie and brought him in, for any man would have done the same for a wounded dog. There was no obligation incurred by the fact that Ham Sheppard had stayed here with him all this time, for Ham Sheppard could not help himself. To go back to Wichita would be to go back to a noose. So as a companion to the general hatred that swirled within him he turned his audible wrath upon Sheppard.

Through those long days when Terry had to learn to sit in bed—through the weeks before he could hang his legs over the side—through

the full month it took to learn to walk. During all that time Terry McCoy cursed Ham Sheppard for a fool and his teachings as worse. Ham Sheppard packed his scanty gear and left, and when he did Terry felt an unexplainable emptiness within him. He had his last visit from the doctor that day, too. He was alone.

"There's no more I can do for you," the doctor said. "You can walk and use your arms, you eat like a horse, and you're putting on weight. For three months now I've been able to do what I wanted with your life. Now I'm giving it back to you."

"Pretty speech," Terry McCoy said. He was thinking of how Ham Sheppard might have said something like that. The doctor seemed to sense his thoughts.

"Sheppard's gone, eh?"

"Yeah, but don't worry," Terry snapped. "I pay my own way. I'll see you get your money."

The doctor's face took on a tinge of color, but his tone did not change. He said, "McCoy, that's a funny thing about my business. You save a man's life and all the time you wonder why. Actually, I could see nothing about you worth saving. Ham Sheppard could, though."

"That's damn noble of him," Terry McCoy said. "He must of found something about himself to save too. He lit out of here in a hell of a hurry. What happened? Did the so-called law in Wichita finally decide to send a U. S. marshal down here after us?"

The doctor fished a pipe out of his pocket and loaded it. He took his time about lighting it and he drew two deep puffs before he bothered to answer Terry's question. When he did answer it was in a long, roundabout way, and the soft earnestness of his voice did not encourage interruption. From time to time he pulled the pipe from his mouth to point its stem like an accusing finger at the man he was berating.

"Trouble with you, McCoy," the doctor said, "you've got a lot of guts and you like to fight for things, but you haven't the faintest idea of what you're fighting for. That's the difference between you and Ham Sheppard. Sheppard knows damn well what he's after, and because of that he just naturally does the right thing."

"Like putting a lot of space between him and a U. S. marshal," Terry supplied. The doctor ignored the interruption.

"When you were shot you had a letter in your pocket for Ham Sheppard. I read that letter, McCoy. It said that things had calmed down in Wichita. Van Heflin was gone. The merchants had gotten together with the farmers and had appointed a new judge and a new marshal. They found the man who was guilty of the murder on Ham Sheppard's place."

That stirred some queer emotions within Terry McCoy, but at the same time he felt as if he were being accused of failing to do his job as a lawyer. Someone else had done it for him. He let his temper flare.

"I don't believe it. Ham Sheppard was always bellyaching about wanting to get back to his land. The only reason he didn't go was because he was afraid they'd hang him if he ever showed his face in Wichita."

"The only reason he didn't go was because you needed him here," the doctor said softly. "You don't need him any more, and you don't need me. Frankly, I'm glad to be rid of you." The old man got up, picked up his bag and shoved his hat on his head. At the door he paused and looked back. "The girl who wrote the letter was worried about you, it seems. Damned if I know why." His keen blue eyes bored into Terry McCoy's face. "And to keep the record straight, you don't owe me any money because I can't charge you. I haven't even got a license. Lost mine trying to do a favor for a friend. It would take more money than I've got to get the kind of lawyer that could get it reinstated." He left, and he slammed the door behind him.

TERRY McCOY tried to forget what the doctor had said after that. It was something that was past—a bad dream that included Valerie Sheppard and her folks and Wichita in general. The only thing tangible was Van Heflin and the remaining men of that paid jury—Cass St. Vrain and Tim Beckett. Tim Beckett, above all others, for Tim Beckett must die slowly as he had left Terry to die. That was Mojave justice.

He paid his keep by doing odd chores, at first. Later, when he was able to ride again, he did the work of three men until at last he felt his debt to the rancher who had kept him was paid. Then he left in the night without a word, and he went to the Last Chance ranch—a saloon and supply store on the border of the Indian Territory and Kansas. Here was the last chance for a man to buy the whiskey that was prohibited in the Territory. Here also was the last chance for a man who was dodging Kansas law, for in a matter of minutes he could be over the line.

The trail crews paused here, thirsty from their long drive through the whiskey-less miles of the Indian Nations. They paused and talked of Texas and they drank the rotten whiskey and fought. And it was all fire for Terry McCoy's blood. Men outside the law boasted of the profits they made selling horses to the government, and Terry joined in their laughter and was offered a place in more bands than one. But he kept apart, gambling a little to make money for food and whiskey. And he kept his ear attuned for word of Van Heflin

and Cass St. Vrain. He kept his hand in practice for Tim Beckett. It was early July when he heard that the Slash V was heading north with a wild band of three-year-olds and a crew bent on trouble.

It was hard to keep from going down the trail to meet the Slash V, but he held himself in check. In a matter of days now—hours, maybe—Van Heflin and Cass St. Vrain would come through that door. Tim Beckett never would, for Terry planned to kill him on sight. He drank a lot and he slept little and his hand became an automatic thing that went toward his gun when a glass clanked too loud or a voice took an edge. Then the Slash V bedded down in the bottoms along Salt Creek.

It was like a well rehearsed play when Van Heflin came to the Last Chance. Terry had played it over in his mind so many times that there was no quick surge of blood—no untoward thrill when the cattleman came through the door. Rather, it was reversed, for Van Heflin had not had the benefit of preparation and he could not conceal the surprised agitation on his face. He came slowly to the bar and ordered a bottle. In that way he had he studied his glass and tried to pretend that this was an ordinary meeting.

"Quite a surprise seeing you, Half Pint," Van Heflin said.

"I know," Terry said. "You thought Beckett killed me, eh?"

"I'd heard something like that," Van Heflin admitted.

"I been lookin' for Beckett to tell him he was wrong," Terry said.

"He's not with me. Hasn't been for some time."

"Oh?" Terry said. "I thought you could always use a good gunman."

"Askin' for a job?" Van Heflin wanted to know.

"I got one," Terry said. "I told you and your paid jury that a long time back."

"Still playin' the white knight, eh?" Van asked.

"Playin' my own hand," Terry said.

He had seen Van Heflin watching the muddy mirror in back of the bar and from the tail of his eye he caught sight of the hulk of Cass St. Vrain lingering near the doorway. A tiny trickle of perspiration was clinging to the center of Terry's back as he tried to keep an eye on both men. In a moment a slight nod from Van would start St. Vrain's guns spewing. In a moment he would be in a cross fire.

HORSES thundered up to the door and there was a garble of shouts. Terry's first thought was of lawmen from Wichita, but a moment later his fears were dispelled by the appearance in the doorway of three Texas cattlemen he knew. They made straight for Van Heflin, and the tension eased slowly away.

"Glad we caught you here, Van," one of the men boomed. Terry recognized him as the owner of the huge RX down in the brush. Another was from the 2Ts between the Sabinal and the Frio.

"We want to tell all the boys what they're gettin' into," the RX man said. "Wichita ain't the same as we left it by a damn shot." He laughed heartily and the other ranchers joined in with him as they sloshed their bottles against glasses. "Feed lots," the RX man went on, jerking his head in the general direction of Wichita. "Farmers got everything fenced in but I'll have to admit they know how to grow hay. My stuff put on plenty of taller waitin' for a train out."

"You mean you been buyin' hay to feed your herd while you held it?" Van Heflin said incredulously.

"Sure," the RX man said. "Everybody does. Pretty good service on the cars now. Only held 'em a week."

"Must of cost you a fortune," Van Heflin said. Terry could feel that old edge coming into the man's voice.

"More than free grass used to cost," the RX man admitted. "But they don't try to hold you up none and the stock takes on weight a sight faster. Looks to me that might be the comin' thing."

Van Heflin set down his bottle with a crash. "I won't pay money for grass to any damn nester," he said. His face had suddenly turned white.

"Your cows will get mighty hungry," the RX man said. "Even the trail is fenced down both sides." He called the bartender and asked information about any other herds camped around here and to all intentions he ignored Heflin completely.

Later, when the RX man and his companions left, he stopped long enough to jab a thumb in Van Heflin's chest. "Things change, Van," he said slowly. "Nobody's tryin' to rob anybody. If they was you know damn well I'd be the first to pick that town up and move it. There's some there don't like the way you high handed them last time, Van. Take my advice and go along peaceful. Prices are good. You'll make a profit."

"You damn right I will," Van Heflin said evenly. "And I'll make it my way. I took that town apart once; I'll do it again. I ain't never seen a fence yet I couldn't cut and I ain't never seen a damn nester's shack that wouldn't burn."

"You start that stuff and you just make it hard for the rest of us. It'll just cause belly-achin' all over."

"And if you've got any guts you'd rather have it that way than pay one red cent to some damn Yankee for grass that was intended for

cows! I got the biggest outfit on the trail and I got the toughest crew. If you don't like the way I play maybe you want to try to change my mind?"

The RX man shook his head. "No, Van," he said slowly. "My stock is on its way to Chicago and I got the money in my pocket. How you play is your business. I'm not looking for any trouble."

Terry McCoy stood back in the half shadows, keeping one eye on the door, his ear cocked to the conversation. As the two cattlemen stood there, intent on their own problems, Terry edged down the bar toward the front door. With a quick movement he stepped outside into the soft, scented, silent—and deadly—night.

As he cleared the door a gun blazed in his face and lead thudded into the wall inches away. Dropping to one knee he drew his gun and fired twice—once to the left and once to the right of the spot where the muzzle blast still burned in his memory. There was a short cough, and Cass St. Vrain came out of the darkness and walked toward the door. He fell there in the oblong patch of light.

The snarling anger of the huge Slash V was heavy in the night when Terry mounted his horse and started at a full run up the trail toward Wichita. . . .

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CHAPTER SIX

The Deputy Marshal of Wichita

THE conflicting thoughts that rode with Terry McCoy that night pressed in around him and kept his mind in a confused turmoil that now had him making excuses for himself, now had him skirting the truth. Once, with the night wind whipping his face and the miles of prairie behind him, he admitted that the only thing that could have made him head for Wichita tonight was the fact that he really wanted to be there all along—that this was the thing he was fighting. But when he saw the red winks of a trail herd campfire he forced himself back to his material argument. It was his chance to break Van Heflin, the man who had broken him. That, he said, was the reason he was riding to Wichita.

But the clarity with which he now planned made a lie of that. He had no intention of making a one man stand against Van Heflin. If that had been the plan why hadn't he made his stand there at the Last Chance? No, it was the farmers, the merchants. Men like Valerie Sheppard's dad and Ham Sheppard himself. He cursed and told himself the Sheppards had nothing to do with this wild ride. They were fools—all of them. But as the night dimmed out to meet the morning he had lost his argument with himself. He wanted to see these people, be one of them. He wanted to hold Valerie Sheppard in his arms as he had once before and tell her that he would move the world to be worthy of her.

When finally he approached the town of Wichita with its puffing trains and its whitewashed holding pens he had resigned himself to the job at hand. He was no crusader, no man with a high ideal. He was a man who had seen a bloody war in the making and had come to warn the farmers and merchants of their part in it. The tormenting questions that still beat his mind were things he could not answer. He was no philosopher. Such thoughts were for men like Ham Sheppard. And so it was that he brought his news to the first man he found at the outskirts of town.

The man was a lean wind-burned farmer with the slow mark of the soil about him. He listened intently as Terry McCoy told with complete disinterest how a herd of Texas cattle was on its way to make its own rules in this dusty town. He had come to pass the news for what it was worth, he said, just as the RX boss had passed the news to Van Heflin. The plowman chewed thoughtfully, then said, "Ham Sheppard been told of this?"

"Ham Sheppard?" Terry asked. "No. I'm telling you. If Ham Sheppard should know it's your business to tell him. I'm riding through." He spurred his horse and went on down the fenced trail. He had done his job now, and he could ride along with his conscience clear. Yet Wichita drew him like a magnet and a dozen men could not have turned him aside from the toll bridge across the river.

Perhaps he didn't realize that he was in front of his old office. Maybe it was accident that made his horse stop there. Terry McCoy told himself that this was so, yet as he leaned across the saddle horn and gazed at the darkened window that had once held his dreams a feeling nearer to homesickness than anything he had ever known seized him and held him. He dismounted and tied his horse to the rack, then walked closer to study the familiar door—the cobweb crusted desk that still stood in the far corner of the single room. His books were on the shelf where he had left them the morning of Ham Sheppard's trial. He didn't hear the step. All he heard was his name.

"Terry—"

She was as lovely as ever. He knew she would be before he turned around. He took his time in order to conceal the feeling that kept prickling the skin of his face. When he did look at her there was nothing to say.

Valerie Shepherd was older now. Not older with time, for it had been just a year. But older in a more important way—a way that showed the temper of understanding. Older in the way that makes a woman's years stay back while the goodness and sweetness of her mellows. She spoke his name again.

"I was just passing through," he managed to say.

"Why, Terry?" she asked. It was as if it were a continuation of that conversation stopped in gunsmoke a year ago. "You belong here, Terry. You know that. We talked about it, you and I. You told me your dreams. Have you forgotten all that?"

"You never really knew me," he said.

"You don't know yourself."

"I've come here to kill a man. A man who pumped me full of lead while I was helpless on the ground. That's why I'm here!" Those words came to him easily, and suddenly he knew why they should. She had called him a killer, once. A man who killed for the joy of it. Now he must prove to her that there was a time to kill.

In doing it he would lose her, that he knew. But to take the easy way, tell her she was right, go to her arms. . . . He had told her that day about the Mojave *alyah*, the men of the tribe who chose to be women. They were men who did not have the courage to face the world. Worse, they were men who did not have the courage to face themselves. He didn't say goodbye. He left her standing there in front of his old law office, and he swallowed against the lump in his throat, for the bright tears had spilled unashamed over the rims of

her eyes and she sobbed audibly as he left her.

THE next few days he spent in Hell Town, but it was a different place than the one he left. Ben and Bill Thompson with their faro layout had come and gone, leaving Sheriff C. B. Whitney dead in the streets of Ellsworth and a young buffalo hunter by the name of Wyatt Earp had earned the job of deputy marshal here in Wichita.

Terry met Earp in the Grand Central and they talked together. They made a strange pair, this five-foot-four avenger with the mark of hate etched in his face and the tall young marshal with the blond hair.

Earp was a man who did not deal in hidden conversation. He knew of Half Pint Terry McCoy, and he warned him that trouble was not welcome in Wichita. In a calm, clipped voice he told him of the association formed by the merchants and farmers and he told of how the Texas men had accepted the new order of things.

"We try to be fair with everyone," Earp said evenly. "If someone still wants trouble we can usually fix him up." He caught Terry's eyes and held them when he said that.

"And you do all this on your own, Mr. Earp?" Terry asked, a taunt in his voice.

"No," the young marshal drawled. "That's not my business. Ham Sheppard is head of the association. He meets the herds over there across the river and tells them the rules. It hasn't been necessary for me to follow up except one time. It worked out all right."

Glancing down at the gun on Earp's hip Terry figured he knew what the marshal meant. But at the same time a sodden fear took hold of him. The vision of Ham Sheppard, that easy-going soft-spoken philosopher going out to reason with Van Heflin sent a tingle of apprehension up his spine. He doffed his glass to Wyatt Earp and left the saloon. An hour later he was down the trail across the Arkansas.

The noise of Van Heflin's trail herd reached him long before he saw the three Slash V riders come out of the crown of dust and head at full lope toward Wichita. Shortly afterward he saw Ham Sheppard and the farmers come across the bridge. The farmers dismounted or pulled up their wagons, and Ham Sheppard went on alone. Terry McCoy mounted and followed along.

They found the point of the herd a mile down the trail. The point riders were busy, trying to hold back the animals whose pace had quickened at the scent of water. He rode close without Ham Sheppard seeing him, and he heard Sheppard call to one of the riders, "Turn 'em left a half mile on. There's a good place to water a little below the bridge."

Terry gigged his horse and dropped alongside Ham Sheppard. Without preliminary he said, "Van is planning on trouble, Ham. Better get your men set before you go on."

"Hello, Terry," Ham Sheppard said without looking around. "Valerie said you were in town."

"I saw Van at the Last Chance. He plans to cut your fences and hold his herd in your hay fields."

"One of the men told me all that. I didn't know it was you brought the news but I figgered it might have been."

"What do you mean by that, Ham?"

"I mean you look for trouble, Terry. When you look at a saw you see the teeth and wonder how deep they could cut you. I see the lumber it might make to build a house."

"This is a hell of a time to start preachin', Ham."

"If I have trouble it will be because you're with me. If you've got a fight with Van Heflin you handle it alone. This is a business trip I'm on."

"All right, Ham. If that's the way you want it. Guess you and me never did see eye to eye."

"A man sees the way he looks," Ham Sheppard said. He ticked his heels against the flanks of his horse and pulled ahead. Down the trail Terry could see Van Heflin reining his big sorrel out to meet him. He also saw the six men detach themselves from the drag and try their guns in their holsters and he caught the movement of the chuck wagon, far back, and saw the band of riders half concealed by the white topped rig. Terry McCoy cursed bitterly as Ham Sheppard, unarmed, rode down the trail toward death.

Like an ominous prelude, a faint rattle of gunfire came from the direction of Wichita. Terry stiffened in his saddle. Then he remembered the three Slash V riders he had seen heading for town. It was the old game of treeing the town marshal. Half Pint Terry McCoy had been an expert at it in the old days. It was not hard to recognize the senseless blast of revolvers. Maybe this young Wyatt Earp was as tough as some seemed to think he was, but even if he was he'd have his hands full in town. He wouldn't be out here backing up Ham Sheppard and his committee.

Half Pint Terry McCoy rode slowly toward where Van Heflin was greeting Ham Sheppard.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Last Fight

THERE was nothing subtle about Van Heflin or his methods. He rode out to greet Ham Sheppard, extended his hand, and

when the farmer accepted it Van Heflin jerked him out of the saddle. Immediately two men rode close and Terry could see the arc of light as one of them cracked a gun barrel across Ham Sheppard's head when the farmer tried to get to his feet. It was as simple as that, and Van Heflin was bellowing his orders to start cutting fences when Half Pint Terry McCoy sank his spurs and headed in with his gun spitting death.

The two men with Van Heflin returned the fire, and Terry saw one of them leave the saddle. The other took a couple of wild shots, then wheeled to give the alarm to the armed band back by the chuck wagon. For a minute Half Pint Terry McCoy and Van Heflin were alone. Both men dismounted slowly, their eyes meeting.

"Guess you've come into my affairs once too often, Half Pint," Van Heflin said. His eyes were slits.

"I told you a year ago your turn was coming," Terry said softly.

"Ever kill Tim Beckett?" Van Heflin asked. There was a sneer on his lips.

"No, but I will," Terry said.

"You're a hard loser, Half Pint."

"I just don't like the smell of skunk," Terry McCoy said.

It took but a matter of seconds. Both men had taken a couple of steps forward, watching for a chance. They knew each other, and they respected each other's speed, yet they knew that within these seconds one of them must be a trifle too slow. Terry purposely made a half stumble, his boot toe kicking up dust. Van Heflin fell for the opening and went for his gun.

It was one of those things where not time but pre-thought bridged the interval. Subconsciously Terry had thought that if he stumbled Van Heflin might draw. He couldn't have consciously thought it, for there was not that much time. But his hand, pre-warned of the possibility, streaked toward his holster and came up first. His first shot caught Van Heflin in the center of the chest. His second grazed the top of Van Heflin's head as the cattleman pitched forward. Then the interval was over, and a dozen men were riding toward him and each man carried leaden death in his hand.

With the killing of Van Heflin Half Pint Terry McCoy became a machine that moved without thought. There was no room for hatred now—no room for weighing of one cause against another. He had taken sides with Ham Sheppard, and since he had, Ham Sheppard was as much a part of him as was his own body. He ran to where Sheppard was raising himself on his elbows, shaking his head against the blood that streamed into his eyes.

He struggled against Sheppard's weight, trying to get the man to his feet. Ham Sheppard seemed oblivious to the world around him. The Slash V riders bore down in a group and lead cut a pattern of death in the dust of the trail. For a second Sheppard sprawled there like a giant lizard, then with Terry's help he forced himself to stand. He swayed for a moment, then said,

"Give me a gun, partner. They don't come too big for us when we're both after the same thing!"

It was like a dream then, standing there side by side with Ham Sheppard. They fired into those massed riders together. They worked like a machine. And in the scramble of plunging horses and cursing men the tide turned and ran, then whirled to gather for another assault, knowing that the weight of numbers would overwhelm the two puny men who stood there alone.

But the lapse of time had given the farmers over by the bridge a chance to act. They came in a body now, not slow-thinking men who had decided to wait out the changes that make a country, but men who had been fair too long and knew now that action must replace their patience. Terry could see them coming forward—some on horseback, some in buggies, but each man with a single purpose.

The cattle, stampeded by the gunshots, moved like a stream of molten lead down the fenced trail toward the flats set aside by the farmers for a watering place. As they moved they gathered speed until the drum of their hoofs flattened the crack of guns.

The Slash V men, without a leader now, swayed first toward the longhorn charges they had brought up the trail, then back to the relentless fire of the farmers. It became a battle of an organized band of righteously indignant men against half-hearted mob violence, and as such it was soon over. Slash V men dropped their arms—pleaded for a chance to reason things out. And Half Pint Terry McCoy mounted his horse and left them there. It was not his battle now. He was no longer a part of it.

Riding back toward Wichita Terry had that feeling of loneliness again. For a few seconds of violence he had been part of a cause, but when the fighting was over he realized again that it was circumstance—not desire—that had put him there. The farmers would go on. They would explain their rules to the Slash V crew, and the Texans would be accepted as long as they lived by the rules. Wichita had changed, and it had left Terry McCoy behind, for he was neither a farmer nor a cattleman. He was what Valerie Sheppard had called him once—a killer who enjoyed his job. Of that jury that had laughed in his face all were dead except one. Gab Vollette, killed in the

Bull Head by Terry's gun. Reb Collom had fallen there at the end of the hotel porch before he could unloose his bushwhack lead. Cass St. Vrain outside the door of the Last Chance, and here today Van Heflin himself. Only Tim Beckett remained.

Tim Beckett, the man who had stood with a rifle muzzle pressed against Terry's body while the former lawyer lay dying on the ground. A complete cold detachment took hold of Terry McCoy. There was still Tim Beckett.

AFTER that, he didn't know, for though he could now admit to himself that he would like to have followed his dream in Wichita—would liked to have become a lawyer and settled down with his fellow men—he knew it was too late. That dream could not exist without Valerie Sheppard and she was gone.

He had heard the hatred in her voice and seen the fear in her eyes when she accused him of being a killer. He had thought then that he could prove to her she was wrong, but now he knew better. That calmness that was in him told him so. He would never live with himself until he had tracked down the last man and killed him. Terry rode into Wichita. He would start here to make his inquiries about Tim Beckett.

He saw Valerie standing there on the porch of the hotel, her face white and drawn. He would have ridden on, left her there, but she came across the dusty street and ran along at his stirrup. Without looking down, he said, "Ham is all right. Everything is straightened out the way the farmers want it."

She said, "And you, Terry? You're all right?"

He didn't answer that, for to do so would be to start another senseless argument. They were worlds apart now, and they would never be together. She ran forward and caught the bridle of the horse. Looking up at him, she said, "I've found Tim Beckett, Terry. I knew you wouldn't rest until you found him."

Her words stunned him. For a split second explanations quivered around his lips. Perhaps he could make her understand what it meant to lie helpless on the ground while a man pumped lead into your body. He bit off his words before he could speak them. "Where?" he asked.

"At the livery barn there at the end of the street."

He dismounted slowly. There in front of her he reloaded his guns, then without a word he started up the street, leading his horse. He seemed to walk on the balls of his feet, like a man accustomed to high heels, and there was a swagger to his step. He didn't look to right or left, but kept his eyes on the red doors of the livery barn ahead. At this moment he was a calculating killer and his thought was to shoot on sight. A crippling shot, he hoped, and then he could stand there and methodically empty his gun into the body of the man who had tortured him.

He left his horse ground-tied in front of the barn and walked straight on inside as if he had never been leading the animal. He let his hand drop to his gun and his voice echoed back to him as he called into the darkness of the barn's interior. "All right, Tim Beckett," he said. "Come and get it!"

There was a shuffling sound in the loose hay. Terry jerked his gun, his thumb hooking back the hammer. He held his fire. Out of the darkness came a man, his face white and set. It was Tim Beckett.

He had a gun on his hip, but it looked as if it had not been used for a long time, for the hand that hung above it was twisted and white and the arm was bent grotesquely out of shape. The man was twenty pounds lighter than Terry had remembered him and long sickness had twisted his body and warped his face.

He said, "Hello, Half Pint."

Terry lowered the gun.

"Go ahead, Half Pint," Tim Beckett said. "I knew you'd find me some time, so I came

here to make it easy. Got a job working in the stable." He nodded toward his right arm. "Van Heflin didn't have work for me after this."

The starch was going out of Mojave Terry McCoy.

"You nailed me twice, Half Pint," Beckett said slowly. "Maybe that's why I did what I did to you—I don't know. I was crazy with pain and I knew this arm was gone for good. You know how it is, Half Pint. Sometimes when you've got gunsmoke in your face you lose your head."

"I didn't know," Terry said, staring at the crippled arm.

Beckett cut him short. "For God's sake don't give me sympathy. I'm not as bad off as you were when I pumped you full of lead. I've still got a chance. I can pull this gun—I've practiced. Go ahead and shoot, Half Pint. It had to come some day. Damn it, go ahead and draw!"

Terry McCoy turned his back on the man. For a second that old feeling of the gunfighter was in him and his muscles bunched against the possible smash of lead. He went to his horse and led it back into the barn. Handing the reins to Beckett he said, "Give him an extra bait of oats, will you, Tim?" He left quickly before Beckett had a chance to answer.

OUTSIDE the world was an unknown place. The spring was gone from Terry McCoy's step now. He walked with the dazed detachment of a man who has spent fifteen years giving everything he has to a job and then is suddenly fired. Not only the job was gone, but a part of his life. The things he looked at here in the streets of the town were strange because he could no longer associate them with violence and gun fighting. Then his eyes caught the faded sign that still hung in front of his old office.

He went there not from any sense of wanting to, but rather because it was a sanctuary. It was a familiar landmark on a strange trail; a landmark that although closely entwined with his past somehow still stood above it. He stood in front of the door peering in the window at the cluttered desk and the dusty books on the shelf. Valerie Sheppard found him there and she handed him a key to the office.

For a long time he looked at her, trying to read what was in her eyes. At last he said, "You knew what was wrong with Tim Beckett all along?"

"According to your code—the laws of the Mojaves—you had every right in the world to kill him," she said. There was a sad little smile on the woman's face.

"You believe that?" he asked. "You really believe that?"

"If you do."

He turned the key in the lock and went inside. His hands felt big and awkward as he leafed through the dry papers. She stood near him.

"What now, Terry?"

He started to talk into the distance, not daring to look at her. "Ham said something out there a while ago," he said softly. He said, 'They don't come too big for us when we're both after the same thing.' If he meant that I'd like to go back to law, Valerie."

"He meant it," she said softly. "After that?"

"I want to pass my bar examination—do it all legal and formal."

"And then?" She was pressing him for a more personal answer. He knew it, and with all his heart he wanted to answer. But he couldn't, in a way. A man couldn't ask a girl to marry him when his entire future was so obscure.

He said, "I have a case then, Val. But there's no money in it. It's the case of a doctor I know who lost his license."

"Ham told me about him," Valerie Sheppard said.

"But I won't have any money for a while," he said awkwardly. She kept moving closer to him and the perfume of her hair was in his nostrils, making him weak—just as it had that first day when he packed her across the muddy street of Wichita. He got to his feet quickly, backing away from her.

"You see, the doctor already paid me my fee on the case," he blundered. "He gave me my life." He was staring unseeingly at the wall, thinking of the doctor.

She came and put one arm around his neck and brought her lips close to his. "Terry," she said softly, "will you let me start spending that fee with you—right now?"

The time for reasoning had passed now. His arms, hungry so long for the feel of her, went around her and pulled her tight against him. He kissed her and found that he did not want to take his lips away. Outside the window the young marshal, Wyatt Earp, paused for a second to look in. He coughed uneasily, then went on toward the jail, herding his Slash V prisoners.

After a long time Terry McCoy sat down at his desk. His hands were trembling and his voice sounded high pitched and weak. He said something about needing to do a lot of studying. He mentioned the names of a couple of books.

The girl took the books off the shelf and laid them in front of him and then walked quickly out the door.

THE END

COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

BY FOWLER AND CASE

"ONE-SHOT" CHARLEY DUESHA, one of the most unusual killers of the frontier West, was also one of the most prolific and lethally accurate. Duesha, who killed thirty-two men, all told, fought a Bowie knife duel with a Spaniard when he was a young man. He killed the Spaniard, but for the rest of his days his slashed right arm hung uselessly at his side. Duesha trained himself to shoot left-handed. Opponents would watch his right hand, but it would be his left that, with dazzling speed, would yank his Colt. This gave Duesha a pronounced advantage. And he seldom missed.

IN THE TONTO BASIN WAR, Duesha killed twenty men. Desperate, the sheepmen brought in two gun-slingers. One-Shot met them and they went for their guns. Duesha's left hand came up with a fistful of blue steel, and the two gunmen crumpled, dead before they hit the ground. One-Shot Charley then rode calmly on into Flagstaff, where the sheriff of Apache County had a warrant for his arrest.

IN FLAGSTAFF, Duesha walked brazenly into the sheriff's office and said to that startled official, "Hear you bin lookin' fer me, Sheriff." The sheriff hastily denied the allegation, and Duesha said, "Glad to hear it," and turned to leave. But as he turned, he caught a glimpse of the lawman going for his six-shooter. Duesha whirled, fired once. The sheriff dropped dead. Duesha unconcernedly removed the warrant from the official's pocket, tucked it under his shirt and rode for home.

BACK IN FLAGSTAFF, a posse was quickly organized and took the trail after him. In the hills, Duesha caught a glimpse of the five-man posse tracking him, and waited for them at a bend in the trail. When they rode up, finally, he started shooting. But this time even the famed One-Shot didn't escape unscathed. In the hospital at Phoenix, Dr. Hughes told him, "You've got four holes in your chest, Charley." One-Shot grunted. "Four, eh?" he said. "Well, dig four holes for four mutton-herders, Doc. I fired five shots—but fer once, I missed a shot." Cattlemen looked upon Duesha as a hero, sheepmen called him a devil. Yet he lived to die, at the ripe old age of eighty-five, with his boots off, and in his own bed!

TOO DAMN' TOUGH TO DIE!

Gripping Novel of North Country Law

By Michael Oblinger

CHAPTER ONE

Sergeant Mannister—of the Mounted

LUKE MANNISTER had grown suspicious. Something about this business didn't look right to him. Halter McQueen had just turned up the lights here at Betty Glasgow's hotel, stamping around on frost-ailing feet. Coming in, the usual crowd of sandfleas, miners and muckers had kicked off enough snow near the entrance to make a bed of slush and ice two inches thick. Hot at the back, cold at the front, the big room seemed faintly blurred to Luke as he sat, humped and hard, at the last table in the back wall row, a cold pipe lining out from rolled-under lips pressed tight to his teeth.

He looked at Jo-Jo Pierce, guide and packer, who sat two tables ahead of him staring moodily at a finger of whiskey in the bottom of a tall glass. His eyes skipped Jo-Jo and fell again on the next customer, a stranger in a crushed-down hat and ear-muffs, a thin man

"Up on the Liard, Corporal Raymond carries on with a bullet in his guts. Constable Mason runs patrol out of Dawson with a broken arm. Eskimos on the Rim have cut Sergeant Oliver to ribbons, and he's using those ribbons for arms and legs, and drinks his own blood in order to live. Those are the kind of men I want. . . ." So spoke Bull-Nose McGraw, district inspector of the Royal Northwest Mounted. . . .

Luke planted a slug between two furtive eyes.

with shoulder-long hair and a sharp, wedge-like face.

Then he rose slowly and passed along the evenly-spaced row of tables to a door. He went out into a low, narrow hall lighted by a single lamp hanging from the ceiling. He made his way to the stairway at its far end, his tall square figure casting heavy shadow on the rough pine steps so that he had to feel with his feet and hold on to the bannister going up. The stairs had twelve steps to the top and now he stood, hesitating. He had turned, hand on a railing, staring into the gloom of the upper hall, listening for sounds but hearing only his heart beating loud and fast and the wind outside banging against the log building.

A door opened far down on his left hand side. A figure stepped through its lighted frame. A slim girl, the one he had noticed earlier in the evening coming in with Jo-Jo Pierce and the stranger with the shoulder-long hair. At the desk, they had signed the register, ordered three rooms for the night and had all gone upstairs. Later, the stranger and Pierce had come down again, talked furtively together for a while near the door, then had taken separate tables.

It was then that Mannister had grown suspicious—he hadn't liked the shape of things, at all. The girl was young, innocent-looking. Nothing innocent should ever be in the company of Jo-Jo Pierce, or the other man, either, by the look of him.

Luke had hoped that he might meet the girl coming down, and now he had. He blocked her passage half way to the stairs.

"Pardon, miss," he said. "May I talk with you just for a moment. Name's Mannister. We'll go to your room."

Luke could feel the surprised, shocked implication she drew out of that.

"We will not go to my room," she said. "Stand aside, you—you—"

"Don't scream," he said. "And don't make too much noise, either. We're going to talk. I won't lay a finger on you if you do what I say. Understand?"

He could see her shaking. "What do you want?"

"Just a few questions. Nothing more," Luke said.

"I—I don't trust you."

"You'll have to, I'm afraid."

"Why can't I talk to you here?"

"Might be interrupted."

Silence. Then she spoke in a low, tense voice mixed with little noises deep in her throat, "Very well. If you insist . . . "

She turned, took three steps, swerved quickly and darted toward the stairs. Luke jumped and caught her, clapped a hard hand over her mouth, picked her up bodily and strode back to the door of her room. Holding her against him, he turned the knob, pushed the door open and carried her inside. There he set her upright on her feet, pushing her lightly back against the wall, hand still over her mouth. With the other hand, he yanked a clean handkerchief out of his breast pocket and showed it to her, then closed the door and slipped the bolt.

"I'll gag you," he said, "and you can write the answers. How'll you like that?"

Her eyes—beautiful eyes—told him stormily and coldly what she thought of him. Her face was white. Her straight nose pulsed softly on either side of its well-formed bridge. Then Luke raised his gaze, staring down at her thick blonde hair.

"If you'll promise to be good, I won't gag you," he said. Cautiously he removed his hand. "Well?"

"What do you want?" she said.

"Talk? Promise?"

"I can't help myself, can I?"

"All right, then," he said wearily, "let's go over and sit down."

There was only one chair in the tiny room so she sat on the bed, pointing scornfully at the chair.

"You'd better make it fast," she said, "before my brother comes up here, finds you, and tears you apart."

"He isn't your brother," Luke said.

"No?"

"No."

LUKE smiled. She was conducting herself pretty much like any other nice girl would under similar circumstances. But the extreme innocence he'd thought he'd detected earlier downstairs when he'd watched her signing the register at the desk, had disappeared upon closer view. She was older than she had seemed then; must be in her early twenties. And the expression wasn't one of innocence either. It was mature and sophisticated, completely grown up.

"What do you want?" she asked. "I mean, what do you want to know?"

"Who you are and why you're with those two men," he answered, continuing to smile. "I know one of them. And I don't like what I know. And I don't like the looks of the other one either."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to warn you—first."

She held her head straight and defiant, watching him from under long lashes that made every flicker cast reproach and disapproval upon him.

"Well, you've warned me," she said. "The interview's over."

"Then you won't talk?"

Color came back to her cheeks fast. "Only this much. You're a brute. Even if you kill me, I won't tell you a thing."

Luke grinned. "You'd better," he said. "It will save me time and may save your skin. Nice lovely girlish skin."

She pointed at the door, furious. "Get out!"

Luke rose slowly, looking down at her as if he hadn't heard. He said quietly, "Maybe I should have started with your two playmates downstairs."

"You wouldn't dare," she said.

"I wouldn't need to, you little fool, if only you'd answer a few simple questions."

"But by what right—what possible right—"

He stopped her with a gesture. "I'm Sergeant Mannister of the Royal Mounted," he said.

He could tell by her face she didn't believe him. And suddenly he was sticky with sweat, watching her through a brittle film of smoked glass, which wasn't glass at all—just looked like glass; and it was brittle because any movement caused it to shatter and glitter and give off a curious soft tinkling sound like that made by particles of ice falling on ice.

Luke's hands were twitching and there was that old pain again centering just behind his eyes.

He sat down heavily and began fumbling for his pipe. Drops of moisture on his forehead had weight. He had watched them in his mirror once growing larger and larger until they were like small crystal balls. Then, breaking from their own weight, they had made trickles down his cheeks. They tasted salty on his lips. He could feel them now.

"You—you're sick!" the girl gasped.

The pain left him.

"I'm all right," he said. He dropped the pipe back in his pocket, took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. There was no film anywhere. She was clear in his sight. Startlingly lovely, he thought. His courage and strength came back.

"Yes, I'm Sergeant Mannister," he said. Then he grinned. "Do I need a scarlet tunic to prove it or would you—"

"You must have papers. Letters. Something."

He had, but he wasn't going to show them to her. He said, "You'd understand my position, miss, if you knew anything about the scope and responsibilities this job of being a mountie entails. I'm not trying to meddle into your affairs at all. But your safety, any person's safety, happens to be—"

"You're talking like a gentleman now," she said, interrupting. "Good. Maybe I'll believe you."

She laughed and Luke listened and felt a warming glow in him. "Do that again," he said. "I haven't heard anything better in months."

"Where have you been?"

"Patrol," he answered vaguely.

"And you saw me and—and thought I was in danger," she said. "But your manner scared me. You were rough and brutal, high-handed and not a bit nice." She went on breathlessly, "How could I believe your intentions were honorable when you acted like that? Then, all at once, instead of being a rowdy, you aren't a rowdy. You speak and behave like a gentleman, like a mountie should. It's confusing. What am I going to think?"

"Well," Luke said, fascinated, "what are you going to think?"

"I don't know. You're two people."

That hit him. He could feel the pain starting again, the old agony and doubt. Hurriedly, he raised his handkerchief, daubing at his forehead. He wouldn't, couldn't look at her. There would be that brittle film. Ice tinkling on ice. An illusion lasting for minutes—or hours. Two people—hell!—he wasn't even one.

"Conscience troubling you?" she asked. "I don't think you're a policeman. Who are you and what do you really want?"

He looked at the floor. "I've told you the truth. Mannister, a cop—my duty as I see it. Nothing more than that."

"I'm not in trouble," she said "and I can protect myself. If you have fears for me, they're not very well grounded."

"Who is that other man?"

"William Rabble. A prospector. He's a little odd. Doesn't look as if he had a grain of sense but he has." She paused, smiling. "You see, I've decided to tell you everything whether I quite trust you or not. He's George Rabble's brother. I found him and brought him here to Ten Peak. Had to go after him. I hired Jo-Jo Pierce to help me find him—and we did."

Luke sat up and stared. "I get it now," he said. "George Rabble, this man's brother, was part owner here of the Pick and Pack mine. He died early in November. This man you dug up is the legal heir. But who are you?"

The girl laughed. "Sue Talmadge, owner of the other part," she said. Then she chided him, "Make you feel any better? See how groundless your suspicions were?"

"Maybe," Luke said. He rose and took her hand. "Thanks, Miss Talmadge. But I hope you'll be careful just the same. Now if you'll let me help you down that dark stairway."

Luke went over and unbolted the door. Sue Talmadge rose, walked to a wall mirror and powdered her nose. Fussing didn't improve it any—it had been perfect before.

Luke scowled. "Look," he said, "there's one little matter I almost forgot. I'm looking for someone. Came here from Yellowknife. Don't want anyone to know I'm Mannister, the mountie. Keep that secret for me, miss?"

This time her laugh was teasing. "That will depend upon how you behave yourself in the future, Sergeant." She turned to meet his gaze fully. "As they say across the Border, I'm passing the buck to you."

CHAPTER TWO

Knife-Thrower

LUKE had his dinner alone in the darkest corner of the big room. His head ached, his skin felt moist. He kept his eyes, like a crystal gazer's, intent on his plate. From the noise they made, one would estimate that fully two-thirds of Ten Peak's population of three thousand odd and assorted souls were packed in here for the evening. Betty Glasgow, big and blustery as a man, with a man's voice and a mucker's vocabulary, paraded around among the tables in her new silk dress, a rustling tight-fitting affair that would burst at the seams before the evening was over and have to be pinned together with nails or toothpicks usually, but sometimes with pins.

Luke wasn't even thinking of Betty when she stopped at his table. He became aware of her only when a rumpled shadow full of fattish curves shut off the light for him.

He looked up. " 'Lo, Betty."

Lips puckered on a broad face whose most striking features were a pair of large, slightly protruding gray eyes and a wide, fleshy, uptilted nose. The nose had a dimple and there was a dimple on her chin and one on her left cheek.

Betty said loudly and roughly, "What the hell yuh hidin' here for, Luke? I got lost jes' tryin' to find you. Whats' wrong, sourdough?"

Luke managed a smile. "I'm okay."

"Yuh don't look it. Yuh look like a sour pickle wrapped up in a wet rag."

"Maybe that's the way I feel."

Betty cocked her huge head and placed a pair of strong muscular hands on her bulging hips. She kept the pose and snarled! "Tongue clipped, ain't yuh? You still sound like a dried up crick. I don't think you like my place, you danged stubborn loafer."

To please her, Luke said, "I love your place, Betty, and I love you, too. Didn't I tell you?"

"Gawd, no."

"It's the truth."

"You an' the truth never planked your bottoms on the same spot yet," Betty assured him. "How yuh like my new dress, Luke? This color's kinda high for me, don't you think?" She sounded worried.

"No," Luke said, giving it his attention. "Bright yellow matches your complexion, it seems to me."

It was a doubtful compliment and he realized that as soon as he had spoken. Betty growled and made a pass at him. Then she scowled. "I didn't come over to visit with you, anyway," she said. "I brung a message. It's from Jo-Jo Pierce. Like to chin with you, he says. Seems like he met you before some place, he says, but he ain't quite sure. If it's okay, he'll come to your table, Luke."

Luke hesitated.

"Snap it up, froze-face. I got duties to do," Betty said sharply.

"All right, send him over."

In a few moments, Jo-Jo swayed toward Luke's corner carrying a bottle in one hand and two clean glasses in the other. He'd

reached the stage in a drinker's evening when fog was settling on the river and the good earth had tangles in its feet. As he fell down in a more or less sitting position on a chair opposite Luke, clattering glassware, Luke saw the butt of a pistol sticking out of the inside pocket of his coat. A long-handled hunting knife in a brown leather case was strapped to his left shoulder. Jo-Jo put bottle and glasses in front of him, fumbled for a cork that wasn't there, discovered the omission by raising the bottle and peering into its neck. Shaking his head, he poured two drinks.

"I seen you somewheres, like I told Betty," he said. "Snifter?"

"That was at Yellowknife," Luke said.

"I was a-movin' some goods fer an outfit there. Quite a job. Here, drink your poison."

Luke put the drink by his plate and finished his coffee.

"You're well loaded down with weapons," he observed. "Also well loaded down."

Jo-Jo leered. "Jes' come in off a hard trek," he said "way back to hell an' gone in the bush 'tother side of Chillcutters Lake. The Cree wa'n't too friendly."

"Weren't they?"

"Naw. Jo-Jo swallowed his drink and poured himself another. "I was workin' fer a girl. Stunner. You seen her around here maybe. Me an' her"—he lowered his voice—"et the same food, bunked by the same fire an' shared our rabbit robe like we was—"

Luke stopped him. "Any more of that," he warned, "and I'll shove that damned bottle down your filthy throat."

Jo-Jo stood up. "Would you?" he said.

"You're a liar and you know it."

Jo-Jo glared, picked up his bottle, sneered, and set his course toward the bar. Ten or twelve feet from Luke's table, he turned, snapping his wrist. The knife shattered Luke's coffee cup. One of the pieces struck Luke in the eye. He pushed back the chair and left the chair in the same motion. Jo-Jo fired his pistol at an on-coming streak, then jerked his head back, rolled his eyes and kicked his heels off the floor. By the time Betty arrived on the scene, Jo-Jo was trickling blood on a limp hand and the bottle, lying on its side, gurgled throatily.

LUKE faced Betty over the sprawled body. Around them a crowd of miners pressed, firing questions, gawking at Jo-Jo and Luke. Luke set his mouth grimly, stooped and picked up the packer's gun and handed it to Betty.

"You'd better take charge of this," he said. "He threw a knife at me, too."

Betty took the weapon. Red tufts in her brows met over the bridge of her nose. She swore. "Halter, damn you, come here," she said

Halter McQueèn, handyman and sweeper, pushed through the crowd. "Yes, mum?"

"Drag it to the men's room an' throw on a pail o' water," Betty ordered. "Then clean this floor. The rest of yuh get back to your places like you got some sense. I won't have no disturbances here. The next man what feels like murderin' somebody can wait fer him outside."

The crowd dispersed. Betty followed Luke to his table. "What happened?" she asked.

Luke told her.

She said, "It was the hooch in him made him act like that."

"I suppose so," Luke Mannister said wearily.

"Most times he's a pretty decent feller."

Luke sat down. He had an answer for that but let it ride. He was disgusted and starting to get sweaty. His stomach quivered. He knew the symptoms. He could feel it coming on. Suddenly a stabbing pain knifed through his head. He raised a hand and placed a finger on a snow-white streak of hair just above his left temple. Here the skull was roughened and sore and he could always feel something pressing inside as if it wanted to get out but couldn't.

Betty was talking. He wasn't listening to her. He heard the tinkling of ice. He rose slowly, deliberately, started forward, shouldering Betty aside.

"Out of the way, you old hag," he sneered.

He walked over to the bar, bumping bodies, shoving along. His teeth were clenched, his face was wet. A coal oil lamp hanging above rows of bottles behind the bar flashed light on a glasslike screen in front of him. Behind the screen, the bartender's red face loomed like a hunk of raw meat.

"What's your'n?"

"Double whisky. Neat."

Luke drank three double whiskeys, pouring them down, picked up his change and left the bar in a long swinging stride. From the big room, he entered the hallway, hurried back to the stairs almost on a run. He vaulted up the dark steps without holding onto the bannister. At the top, he grabbed the railing to swing himself around, then plunged down the upper hallway to the last door on the right hand side.

He found his key and let himself in. Then he closed the door and stood panting in the darkness. Every nerve in his body stung. The key slipped from his grasp. Without bothering to look for it, he stumbled forward with raised hands and located a table, passing hands over it until floating fingers touched a small tin box full of tiny sticks. He struck one of them on the table top, watching is sulphurous flame curl up along the match stick almost to the nail of his thumb. Then he let it fall on the table—a twisting red and black string. It

darkened and disappeared. Luke's shoulders came forward, sagging.

"God!" he groaned.

He hadn't the courage to light the candle and see that fogged glasslike barrier in front of his face again. It was enough to hear the dull clinking of ice. He couldnt take much more of this. He found his way to the bed and threw himself across it.

He lay there, trembling—hot. The air, usually cool in here, was like a blast from an oven. Yet he knew that the panes of the two, windows fronting the street were thick with frost. Thirty below outside. A rising gale. The big frame building shuddered.

CHAPTER THREE

Deal at Chillcutters Lake

SUDDENLY someone knocked at the door. He rolled to his side, licking cracked lips, not quite sure whether the knocking was inside or outside of him.

It came again, louder.

"Go away!" he snarled.

"Sue Talmadge," a frightened voice said. "Please, won't you see me just a moment?"

Luke gritted his teeth and swore. "Hold it!" he growled. "God, can't I get a moment's peace anywhere? You alone?"

"Yes."

He rose, stumbled over to the door and yanked it open. He heard a smothered sob. Sue Talmadge stood in the light from the hall lamp. A coat was thrown around her shoulders. Her cheeks were shocking in their whiteness. Along the soft smooth curve of her throat drops of blood oozed out of two tiny cuts, shaped like crescents.

"Fingernails!" Luke gasped. "Someone tried to choke you."

"Y-yes."

"Who?"

"That man—Rabble's brother."

"Imposter. He's not Rabble's brother at all. What happened?"

"He—he had a paper he forced me to sign—a quit-claim or something. I didn't read it. He wouldn't give me time."

Luke's body shook with fever. "Serves you right, you little fool," he said. "I warned you. And this is only the beginning. You might beat that thing in court by proving that the prospector forced you to sign. But he'll have witnesses to swear otherwise—witnesses to your signature and some sneaky notary public will have affixed his seal. Nice mess, dammit, and all your fault."

She stepped back away from him, startled. "You—you're that other man!"

"Shut up!" he said. "I haven't any sympathy to waste on you."

He shivered violently, knees buckling, and slid to the floor. When he came to, there was a light in his room. He was lying on his bed. Sue Talmadge was sitting in a chair. His head didn't throb any more. He could see her clearly and his ears were so sensitive to sound he could hear his eyelids blink with a rustling like paper.

An expression of relief came over her face. "I'm glad for your sake," she said. "Was it because you'd been drinking?"

He looked at her and didn't move. "No. I wasn't drunk. Nor physically sick." He grinned. "I'm emotional as a girl," he said. "I faint easy."

A frown traced imperfect lines on her forehead. "You're lying," she said.

Cautiously, he swung his legs over the quilt and let them dangle above the floor. Nothing happened. Then he sat up. "I was lying to you," he said gravely. "But let's forget me and—"

"No. Please tell me," she begged, cutting in. "Haven't I a right to ask questions, too? Don't I deserve some consideration for—well, dragging a big ox like you and lifting and tugging and almost breaking my poor back?"

He looked down at the floor stubbornly.

She laughed briefly, unnaturally. "Nice combination," she said. "A girl scared stiff and a strong man who—who's weak. A mine owner who isn't a mine owner. A mountie who talks like a thug and faints like a sissy. Lots of sense in that."

"Don't rub it in," he said.

"Then talk, damn you. I can get tough, too." Her eyes flashed. "What's wrong with you? Crazy?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid of it," he said. He raised his hand and touched the white streak in his black hair, just above the left temple. "Bullet taken out there. There's still pressure. Likely some splintered bone. Need an operation. Wrote to headquarters for a relief man. Sure, if they had one. Asked me to carry on until, dammit, he comes. A month, six weeks from now maybe if I cross my fingers and—you know—pray." A little moisture formed at his hairline. He continued, "I don't know why I'm telling you at all. I'm talking too much. Cop with a bullet heating up his brain. Maybe abcess. Fun!" He paused again. "It isn't that I'm afraid of fainting. That's happened before. It isn't that I'm afraid of going mad either—I'm half that now."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"Going completely berserk and killing everything in sight."

"You won't," she said.

Sweat rolled down his face. "I'm a mountie. There's work to do. I have to do it, Miss Talmadge."

"Sick cop—scared girl," Sue Tadmadge

mused. "Say, maybe we can help each other."

Luke rose, went over to the table, reaching for a pitcher and glass. He drank two glasses of water greedily, returning and sat on the bed.

"If that man was George Rabble's brother and the rightful heir," he said, "he wouldn't have forced you to sign that quit claim, or whatever it was—that's pretty obvious. Are you sure there is a brother?"

"Yes," Sue answered. "Just before George died, he asked me to find his brother. Said he was prospecting over near Chillcutters Lake. George hadn't kept in touch with him very closely because of an old quarrel. The brother never came to the mine. On several occasions, though, George sent him money. A grubstake, he called it. But the brother never wrote."

"Did your partner have a picture of his brother?"

"No."

"So you hired a guide, this Jo-Jo Pierce, to take you over to Chillcutters Lake. Right? Who recommended Jo-Jo to you?"

"The general manager of our Pick and Pack mine, Mr. Noble. Jo-Jo had done some freighting for us."

"He did, huh?" Luke stroked his chin. "Well, you and Jo-Jo made inquiries at Chillcutters Lake—"

Sue interrupted, "It was simpler than that. When we hired him, Jo-Jo told me he knew Bill Rabble. Could take me right to his shack, he said. On Lazy Man's Creek. The creek flows into Chillcutters Lake."

"Ah! Now we're getting somewhere. Jo-Jo had a friend at Chillcutters Lake and, between them, they fixed up this deal."

"I'm certain you're right."

LUKE was feeling so much better now that he filled and lit his pipe. It seemed cold in the room. He blew a smoke ring toward Sue, watching it twist and fade. Then he put the warm stem between his teeth, clicking his teeth on it.

"Please don't do that," she said.

Luke didn't hear her. He clicked some more, withdrew the stem and said, "Where the hell you think the real Bill Rabble is?"

"Likely at Chilcutters Lake."

"I imagine. Maybe I ought to go over there and dig him out of his snowdrift and put him in circulation here. I don't like any of this." Luke's pipe had gone out and he had to light it again. Absentmindedly he dropped the burned-out match on the bed. Sue frowned, rose and picked it off the quilt, walked over to the table and placed it on a clean tray.

"You'll set fire to yourself some day," she prophesied dismally.

"I don't care. Do you?"

She blushed. "No."

"That settles that." He filled his mouth full of smoke and blew it through his nose. "Don't interrupt me. I'm thinking. Listen, you're in a bad spot. With that paper you signed, Jo-Jo's boy friend can keep you away from the mine. Legally, you can't walk into your office, sit down at your desk, give orders, or even peep into your books. You're a rank outsider now. All you can do is start a suit against him. All I can do is arrest him and sentence him to sixty or ninety days for assault, provided I can prove he was the one who assaulted you. That isn't as easy as it looks. He'll get his hands on your gold and Rabble's gold and sell it right under you pretty nose." Luke paused and regarded her sternly. "How many bricks you got over there now?"

Luke could bearly hear her answer, "About —about eighty thousand dollars worth."

Luke swore. "Jo-Jo *was* smart," he commented dryly. "To look at him, you wouldn't think so. No wonder he started to celebrate tonight. Now, Miss Talmadge, how much money have you got in the bank?"

She sniffed. "Is this a proposal?"

"Don't be stupid," Luke said. "Pick and Pack must have a checking account somewhere."

"Certainly. Right here in town."

"Lovely," Luke said. "They may be able to take that away from you, too. In any event, they can tie it up."

"Please—no!" Sue wailed. "It's all I have except my house. I—I just drew enough for expenses and put everything back in the mine. New machinery and equipment, you know. And cottages for the miners and—and—"

Luke broke a match trying to relight his pipe. "Oh, hell!" he said. "Sure, it's tough. Why didn't you think of all this before? Now you haven't a dime to your name and you can't get anywhere on a mountie's salary."

"I don't think you're very nice," Sue said. "You sound like that other man."

Luke pretended he hadn't heard her. He dropped his pipe back into his pocket. "I'm tired of smoking matches," he said. "Let's have a cigarette."

Sue sniffed. Luke forgot about the cigarette. "Ah," he said, "I've got it. We'll have Bill Rabble on our side if and when we can find him. They won't stop him if he's decent and honest and let's hope he is."

"He's a wonderful man if he's anything like George was," Sue said dreamily.

Luke tried to do some more heavy thinking and quit. So he asked her a routine question:

"How far is it out to the Pick and Pack, about ten miles?"

"Twelve," she said.

"How come you didn't go on to the mine tonight instead of stopping here?"

"We were too tired."

"Well, I'm planning to tuck you into my bed right now, Miss Talmadge," Luke said. He stood up, feeling fine. All the pain had gone. Just a light pressure under that white streak, like a finger touching there, nothing more. But when that finger stiffened and probed—

He put the thought away with an effort. She was staring at him curiously, doubtfully.

"I have my own bed," she informed him coldly.

"You're staying right here," Luke said. "I'm taking your bed and your room. I don't trust anyone, not even Jo-Jo. Your door unlocked?"

"Yes."

He turned and strode to the door, bent down, found his key, straightened and thrust it into the keyhole. Next, he examined the bolt.

He swung his head and frowned at Sue. "Lock and bolt working," he said. "But as an extra precaution, pull the bed over in front of the door. Good night, Miss Talmadge."

Sue choked. "Good night, Sergeant," she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Body for Boothill

LUKE went down to the big room looking for Jo-Jo Pierce and the prospector with the crushed-down hat. In the crowd, he saw Halter McQueen sweeping up a broken bottle some playful miner had hurled at a friend. As Luke stepped up behind him, Halter was telling the world in a muffled voice his low opinion of muckers and miners, in general, supplementing it with some stinging comments on the habits and characteristics of sandfleas, too, that shiftless no-account breed that panned gold from river bars in the spring and summer and cheap booze from hotel bars in the winter.

Halter swished around with his broom. "Tuh hell with the lot!" he said.

Luke spoke over his shoulder, "Halter, what happened to Jo-Jo after you watered him down?"

"He wen'out."

"Where?"

"I didn't ast him," Halter grumbled. "Him an' thet friend o' his what brought in the girl, the feller with the sauce pans over his ears, got their luggage an' checked out."

"How long ago?"

"Not more than a hour."

Luke brought out some loose change and poured it into Halter's hand. "When you get a moment to spare," he said, "slip across the street to the Empire North Hotel. Find out if they're there."

"Thanks, Luke." Halter leaned the broom against his chest, counted the money and dropped it into his pants' pocket. "Two dollars." he said. "But what fer?"

"I'm just curious," Luke said.

Betty Glasgow back-slapped her way around a small standing group of miners, near one of the tables, then charged down on Luke.

"So I'm an old hag, am I?" she demanded fiercely. "An old hag! What yuh think you are?"

Luke grinned. "Tell me," he said.

Betty told him in a few well chosen words. "That wa'n't no way to address a lady," she concluded. "Next time I'll give you a dang good poke in the jaw."

Luke apologized. "My head was splitting," he said. "Besides, I was thinking of someone else."

"I can't make you out, Luke," Betty complained. "Sometimes you're sweet as a kiss. Then, all of a sudden, you—"

Luke interrupted, "Halter says that Jo-Jo and his friend got sore and checked out."

Betty's protruding eyes changed lights. The pupils grew smaller, brighter. She tightened the corners of her lips.

"I lose a Rabble an' I gain a Rabble," she said. "Seems kinda odd to me."

"Betty, what are you talking about?"

"Bill Rabble ain't no common name, is it?" Betty asked.

"No."

"Well, this feller, Bill Rabble, an' Jo-Jo Pierce check out," Betty continued. "A few minutes later, a sourdough stuck up with snow an' worn down to his shoestrings, drops over to my desk an' asks fer a cheap room, the cheapest I got, an' a grubstake fer a week. All he has is five dollars worth o' nuggets, a cheap watch an' a frost-bit honest face. He'll hock the works with me if I'll trust him. Right off, I take him up. He kinda appeals to me. I show him the bridal suite on the ground floor, introduce him to the cook, slip him a couple drinks an' some spendin' money, then drag him to my office to sign the book. What name yuh think he wrote down, Luke?"

"Bill Rabble."

"How'd yuh guess it?"

"You told me," Luke answered, gulping. He smothered his excitement. "Two Bill Rabbles in one night, huh? Gave the last one your bridal suite. He must have torn your great big ox heart right out by the roots, Betty."

"I kin spot a gent a hull lot further than I can spit," Betty admitted, blushing. "Anyhow, I got a hunch. Mebbe more than a hunch."

"What is it?"

"Them two Rabbles is heirs to George Rabble's share of the Pick and Pack mine. Sue

Talmadge brung the first one in herself. Don't thet point to it?"

"Seems so."

" 'Course, it does." Betty folded her arms, breaking out a seam in her new dress "Odd they was both named Bill, though."

"Maybe they're cousins," Luke suggested helpfully.

"I never thought o' that."

Luke cupped a hand under his chin. He smiled at Betty but his thoughts were on Bill Rabble in the bridal chamber. An unexpected stroke of luck for Sue Talmadge and a break for him, too. Ten days round trip to Chill-cutters Lake saved. Hard trail, stormy weather. The real Bill Rabble must have heard the news of his brother's death.

Luke forced a yawn. "Tired," he said. "Think I'll turn in early, Betty."

"Uh-huh," Betty said. She handed him a toothpick. "Fer you go, would yuh mind, Luke? Dammit, I—"

"No trouble," Luke said gallantly.

He gathered the parted seam with experienced fingers, forced the hard point of the pick through the silk, dropped his hands and nodded.

"All set, Betty."

"Stop at the bar an' tell Jake it's a treat on me."

"No, thanks. See you in the morning."

LUKE struck for the hall door, paused there to wave to Betty, and went out of the room. He closed the door softly. Although he wasn't quite sure, he was pretty sure, that the bridal suite was up front facing the street. Last door at the end of the hall. He walked quickly there and knocked.

No answer. He knocked again, listening. Not a sound. Mighty heavy sleeper Rabble was but, of course, as Betty had said, worn down to his shoestrings after a hard day on the trail. That and the hot food and drinks would make anybody sleep.

Luke twisted the knob and pushed. To his astonishment, the door swung in. He struck a match and entered. In the dim light he could see Rabble in bed and a dresser with a coal oil lamp on it and some clothes thrown over a chair. Lighting another match from the flame of the first one, he whisked out the original flame and tiptoed over to the dresser. Removing the glass lampshade, he turned up the wick with the hand holding the match and lighted the wick.

Thrusting the shade down inside the steel grippers, he regulated the wick and turned to awaken the sleeper.

He couldn't make a sound. Rabble's head lay on a red-soaked pillowslip. A long limp arm hung down over this side of the bed. Frost bites showed black on the parchmentlike cheeks. The chin was raised above a long deep knifecut extending from the lobe of one ear slantwise around and down the curve of his throat to the joint in his collarbone. The quilt and top sheet were a mess. Luke turned away softly, blew out the lamp and went out in the hall. He closed the door as quietly as a man closing a book.

In the big room once more, he moved through the crowd, had a quick drink at the bar, watching the front entrance. He hadn't long to wait. Halter McQueen came in from the street, stamping his feet and blowing on his fingers.

Luke met him midway from the bar.

"Well?" he asked.

Halter cursed the snow and the cold, then answered Luke's question:

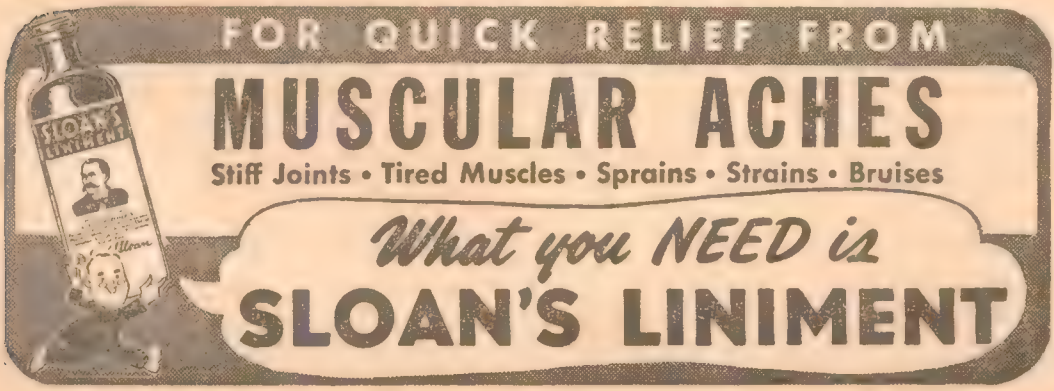
"Ain't neither Jo-Jo or the other feller there. I asked the clerk an' I looked in the bar. Did I earn my two dollars?"

"Yes," Luke said. "Now lend me your coat and parka. Think I'll take a turn up the street and back."

"My parka an' coat! Ain't you got—"

"Here's another dollar. Don't want to walk up to my room, Halter."

Halter nodded. "They's a pair o' mitts in one pocket," he said.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SLOAN'S LINIMENT

The coat was small and the parka didn't fit any too well. Luke put them on and sauntered out on the street like a gentleman taking the air. But the air, he discovered, gulping down some of it, was better conditioned for tough guys with leather sets of lungs. Wind, battering along the street, harrowed the snow and tossed it around. Main Street shed light of a sort on drifted walks through coated windows. Up ahead, two pedestrians waded to their waists with the plunging, jumpy motions of a pair of mountain sheep.

Luke turned into a piled entrance and slid down toward the door. A sign over the door read, NORTHLAND POOL AND BILLIARD PARLORS. He went in, trading the hundred dollar roar of the storm for a two-bit tempest in a teacup. As at Betty's, there were assorted souls, all sorts, lack of standing room, a good deal of drinking, plenty of arguments and scuffles and, now and again, a drag-down fight. But unlike at Betty's, there was a broader strain of humanity here. Rubbing elbows with miners, muckers or sandfleas, Luke saw short chunky Eskimos from out on the Rim, and coffee-colored Indians, mostly Crees. Also, here and there, a white trapper, snarled of beard and as aloof as an iceberg, stood around like a spectre from another world.

Luke made his way toward one of them.

"Hello, pardner."

" 'Lo."

"Bad storm."

"Yah."

"I need a dog team bad," Luke said, getting right down to business. "Twelve mile run. It's important. I've got to start now."

The trapper looked at Luke curiously out of a pair of frozen dark eyes. He raised his shoulders in an unsympathetic shrug. Then he turned his back.

Luke whispered over the trapper's shoulder, "A man has just been murdered at the Glasgow Hotel. You know, Betty's place. The men who did it have gone out to the Pick and Pack mine, I think. I want to catch 'em there."

The trapper faced about. "How do I know—"

Luke felt a sudden horrible twinge in his head. He swayed toward the trapper, caught himself, and exploded, "I don't lie, damn you, if that's what you mean. Murder. Get it—a killing? I want your team."

"I don't lend my team."

"Then you can drive them yourself, you suspicious tramp."

Luke reeled back the length of a pool table, collided with a mucker behind him, twisted aside and fell on the floor. He got up very slowly, holding one hand to his jaw. A film of glass, breaking glass, tinkled around him.

He looked at the trapper through faintly obscuring fog. The face was dark and suspicious. The man raised an arm and pointed at Luke.

"He jes' croaked a feller at the Glasgow Hotel. Wanted to borry my team to escape. Catch him," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dog Team for the Mountie

THE mucker made a grab at Luke. Luke slid out of reach, jumped toward the trapper. The trapper jumped toward him. There was a sound like smashing boards, followed by a thud. Luke darted toward the next man rushing in to help. The next man plowed into an uppercut. The uppercut closed his jaws with a snap, drove his head up, yanking on his neck, and threw him, twisting, in a rearward direction. On Luke's left, a short red-faced man who looked like an overdrawn cartoon of John Bull, caught up a billiard cue by the wrong end and struck viciously at Luke.

Luke took the blow on one shoulder, seized the cue and rammed it into the short man's belly. The man sat down, sick. Twenty feet away, a hawk-nosed Cree, sneering at the clumsy efforts of a superior race to settle a simple little matter like this, flipped his knife, confident of results.

A splash of red showed on Luke's neck where the blade had sliced into a tendon. Luke kicked the knife under a table, started for the Cree. The Cree started for the door. Everyone else started for Luke. Braking heels, Luke swerved, whirled, came to a dead stop with steel glinting from his left hand, mouth tight, lips bruised on his teeth. Backing slowly toward the wall, his eyes defied the crowd.

"No one's going to take me," he said.

His brains were beating like bludgeons. Under the white streak was heat and pain. Strangely, at one side of his mind, in one corner of his thinking, he knew that the demon roaring in him was not his demon. It was a ruthless interloper taking charge, a devil with spiked hoofs and forked tail.

Luke held his gun ready, sidling along the wall, glancing toward the door. The glasslike film and weaving fog hid nothing. He could hear every sound in the room. Suddenly he bolted. A bullet crashed into the door frame ahead of him. He got out safely, plunged along a drift, leaped over an obstruction and fell in a long gliding sprawl in front of something that made a wall above him eight or ten feet high.

It was the wall of a lean-to attached to the next building. Rising, he felt a flurry of snow, cold on his hot cheeks. He stumbled back into an alley, waded the alley to a cross-street and

went on from there toward a high board fence enclosing several acres of snow-covered ground. Flush with the fence on its far side, showing through an open gate, was a low shed, screened in front with woven wire. There were two small gates at either end. In the shed were boxes of frozen fish, barrels of seal oil, a large stone stove with a metal top for cooking dog food. Nearby, were stacks of cordwood in four-foot lengths, piles of kindling and birch bark. As Luke crossed the compound toward the shed, he could see the glow from the banked fire in the stove and moving light from a lantern swinging from the arm of a stocky man in a deerskin coat, felt boots stuck into enormous shoepacs and a fur cap with the flaps pulled down.

Entering the gate nearest to him, Luke cased his gun and called out irritably, "That you, Brody?"

"Sure, it's me," Brody said.

Luke strode over. "Jo-Jo Pierce and another man have their team in your compound tonight?"

"Yep, but they went again."

"Long?"

"Yep, a hour ago."

"I want a light sled with toboggan runners and five or six huskie or malemute dogs," Luke rasped. "Make it fast, Brody."

Brody swung his lantern up toward Luke's face as if he wanted to link the folly of the words with the ignorance of the speaker. What he saw caused him to lower the lantern and step back.

"You got blood all over you," he said shakily. "It's froze to your coat."

"Get that team ready."

Brody hesitated, then shook his head. "I don't own no teams. This is a livery."

Luke caught Brody by the shoulder. Brody gritted his teeth, closed his eyes.

"Leggo me!" he moaned.

"Pick out the fastest team and the lightest sled."

"Yore killin' me. Stop! Quit!"

Luke spun Brody around and pushed him toward the gate. He followed swiftly, cursing.

"You heard me the first time," he said. "Now step!"

THREE minutes later, Luke drove out of the compound to the cross-street, swung right toward Main and followed Main until the buildings on either side fell away into the darkness. He was driving into the wind, and the wind was his compass, a cold champion slugging down from the ice-cropped Beaufort Sea into the leaky funnel of the Mackenzie Basin, thence on across the broad frozen face of the Great Bear. Snow tump-lined from its frigid head, it was crossing the overland portage in long lunging strides like a boss packer crazy with mosquitos. Through the slit of Luke's parka, driven snow, gritty as sand. Against his chest, the pushing hand of a monster. Beneath his feet, the driver's stand, bucking and pitching. Overhead, a tattered, flapping cloak of blackness.

Luke clung to his hand-grips, silence in him to counterbalance the tumult outside. He carried a sweaty head on a freezing body. Pressure behind his eyes was letting up a little. The pain wasn't too bad. His rage had sputtered out like a miner's lamp in an air-blocked tunnel.

His strength had gone with his rage. Now he was only a weak, fearful cop plowing his way in the dead of night through the belly of a blizzard. The haunting spectre of what the next spell might bring shuddered to his sight.

"I won't go on with it," he said. "What do they expect? What more can they ask—eight weeks—and only a promise. One letter. "Stick it out a while longer, Mannister. We'll send someone."

The hell they would! Down at headquarters, he could hear old Bull-Nose McGraw, inspector for this district, snorting over the appeal lying on his desk. "Sick? He can damn well stay sick. A mountie is never sick. Complaining of a headache—dizzy spells. Up on the Liard, Corporal Raymond carries on with a bullet in his guts. Constable Mason runs patrol out of Dawson with a broken arm. Eskimos on the Rim have cut Sergeant Oliver to ribbons, and he's using those ribbons for arms and legs, and drinks his own blood in order to live. Those are the kind of men I want."

Bull-Nose, tough old inspector. Eyes full of challenge. Muscles in his cold hard face strung together with bands of steel. And a heart in him as big as a lump on a mosquito. What could anyone hope from him?

Sick! A man with a white streak in his hair, and maybe a yellow streak in his spine. One of these times, in a murdering fit—

Luke stared, swallowed, and spoke out loud, "Lights. Pick and Pack mine. I made it all right."

A grappling horror seized him. He was weak as a rag. His knees were buckling. A moment when he floated, struggling. From his standing-board, Luke leaned forward and toppled into the sled. When he recovered consciousness, the lights were behind him. He swayed to his knees, gripping the sides of the carryall. Obediently, his team had gone on through the mining camp. He was heading away from the straggling frontier of muckers and miners, the region of gold-bearing quartz, into the long empty tundras beyond. A few days eating dog, then the dogs would eat him. The somber Arctic brooding over its dead. A heap of gnawed bones.

Luke turned his eyes from the lights faintly pricking through the pall. Relief would come too late, anyway. He'd be stark mad before he could trek the eight hundred miles Outside to Edmonton, where a surgeon could probe for the splintered bone and cut out the abcess, or whatever it was to relieve that pain and pressure. Going out like this would be simpler and no one would ever suspect. He could leave the tally-sheet clean. He wouldn't murder anyone. He wouldn't insult a girl like Sue and a rough diamond like Betty. He wouldn't brace an honest trapper with language unfit for a skunk. And that nagging, irritating clinking of ice, the fog weaving like smoke in his eyes, the throbbing in his head, the weakness in him, the demon in him, the fury, the fever, the flame—all that blotted out on a nice clean expanse of snow.

Luke raised his whip and cracked it. "Mush!" he yelled.

Rotten business at the Pick and Pack. Gooey murder in a honeymooners' bed. Jo-Jo and his friend would be taking out eighty thousand dollars worth of gold bricks and selling them right under the nose of the loveliest little lady Luke had ever met.

Now he remembered that remark of hers that had sort of touched him, "Scared girl—sick cop. Maybe we can help each other."

By God, maybe they could. She'd helped him once and he'd tried to help her. But now he was running away from a demon. He was giving up. He was mad at Bull-Nose and was letting his personal business come ahead of everything else.

Luke hawed his team sharply and drove back, watching for a faint glow that would soon blossom into a pale shimmering bank of lights against the dark frames of miners' cottages. But as he approached, the mine's building also showed light, and the office next to it, and the supply store across the street.

Luke drove to the supply store, tied his team and went in. A tall man was stooped behind a counter scooping sugar from a burlap sack into a small paper bag. He gave Luke a casual nod and went on with his work.

"Stormy," he said. "I'll be through in a minute."

"I don't want to buy anything," Luke told him. "See the boys are at it tonight."

"Three shifts," the clerk said. "That's regular. Six day week and Sunday off." He put the paper bag on a set of scales, peered at the indicator and gently shook his scoop to add more sugar to make the right weight. Then he glanced at Luke. "Looking for a job, mister?"

"Maybe," Luke said. "I don't know yet."

"You could talk to the manager," the clerk suggested, beginning now to stare at Luke. "Over at the office. John Noble's his name."

"Thanks," Luke said. "Who's the owner?"

"George Rabble an' Sue Talmadge was. George died. Now it's George's brother, Bill Rabble and a feller named Pierce. New owners just got in."

"Think I'll gab with them," Luke said. "The job I want is pretty hefty."

"Mining engineer?"

"No."

"I doubt if you could talk to 'em now. They're going over the books with Noble."

"Businesslike," Luke said. "I'll take a chance, anyway. Thanks again. All right to leave my team out front?"

"Sure."

Luke walked to the door. The clerk called after him, "There's a basin an' water inside if you wanted to wash that—"

CHAPTER SIX

The Man from Dawson

LUKE cut off the sentence by opening and closing the door. He was on the street. Crossing over, he stopped to stare at the sign, OFFICE PICK AND PACK MINES. The office was housed in a square one-story frame building. Four lighted windows in front, a thick-paneled door. Through a window's covering frost, he could see dimly, in silhouette, the figure of a man.

He knocked, using the butt of his service revolver. He heard steps.

A voice that must be Noble's demanded harshly, "Yah, who's there?"

"Message from Miss Talmadge," Luke said.

A bolt rattled, a lock clicked. The door squealed open. Luke thrust his gun into Noble's belly.

"Lead me straight to the owners," he said. "I'm the message. If you want a swift journey, just call out a warning or speak out of turn. Walk!"

Noble turned his heavy body around and climbed a short flight of steps. He was champing on a cigar that lined out at an angle from full red lips ripening below the sheltering ledge of a broad nose in a broad, pink face. The eyes were wide apart, wide awake, and blue as cobalt. He had a mole on his chin and a scar on his forehead.

They entered a small waiting room.

Luke said, and his voice dragged, "Never thought of looking for you here, Hopper. You've come up in the world."

"You're mistaken. Noble's the name."

"It doesn't matter," Luke said. "A mole, a scar and an odd-shaped nose. I could mix 'em in a bag, lose the bag and still match them perfectly from memory using only a hunk of mud. Pickings weren't so good at Dawson two years ago when you bushwhacked a cop

named Mannister. You remember that?"

The manager led on toward an inner office door. "Stop here!" Luke said.

Noble stopped, glancing back over his shoulder. His cheeks were flabby. The cigar was mangled to shreds. White circles showed around his eyes.

"W-what do you want?" he faltered.

"You," Luke said. Then he asked, "Pierce and his friend in that office?"

"Yes."

"I'll talk to you first." Luke reached out, slapping Noble's sides, hips and chest, removed a small revolver from the man's breast pocket, then spun him around. "You're Hopper, not Noble," he said. "Hopper, a poker shark at Dawson two years ago. I asked you to leave town. That was a break for you because I had the evidence that could have put a year's steel brackets around your bedroom, parlor and bath. A break—and you shot me out of sheer gratitude. Damn you, a skulker at the side of a trail. Winchester .30-30. A screen of willows. Remember?"

The red tip of the manager's tongue curled upward over an ash-colored lip, flicked like a snake's and was gone.

"I'm Noble," he insisted hoarsely.

Luke grinned. "The name doesn't fit. You thought I was dead when you slipped over where I was sprawled on the trail and gave me that parting kick. It only broke one rib. Just one. I appreciate that. It was your party. I was only the guest. Remember?"

The door of the inner office opened and Jo-Jo lunged into the waiting room, howled, and dropped his gun. Luke's revolver roared. Hopper leaped into a jabbing steel barrel that broke off two teeth. He backed away, spitting.

Jo-Jo sucked on a pair of bleeding fingers. "You!" he said.

Luke herded the two men in front of him into the inner office where the prospector sat with a handkerchief spread on his lap. A hand squirmed under it. Luke despised such greenhorn tricks. He was getting irritable. His brow felt damp. He heard a tinkling. He watched the handkerchief on the prospector's lap crawl out toward one kneecap very slowly, warily. Suddenly Luke planted a slug between two furtive eyes, near a looping-down lock of hair. Something shiny slid out from under the handkerchief and fell on the prospector's feet.

A metal ashtray on a table jumped. Smoke curled up from Luke's gun. The prospector rolled his eyeballs, twisted his head, sagged lower and lower and flopped to the floor.

"I never did like him," Luke said. "That long hair—those damn ear-muffs. And he was only a stooge, a filler-in. The brains of the outfit is Mr. Noble. Somehow, I just couldn't believe old Ear Muffs had it in him, or Jo-Jo either What this job needed was a smart in-

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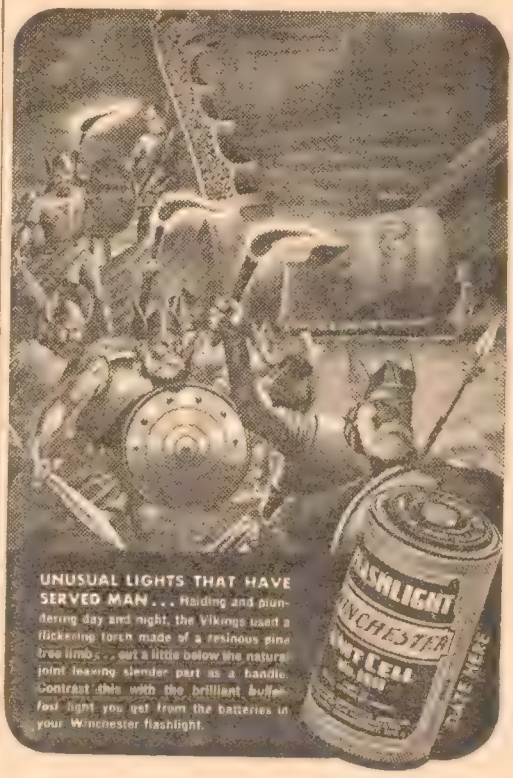
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side worker. Ex-gambler with crooked cards."

"I don't seem to foller you," Jo-Jo said, still sucking on his fingers. "That was a innocent man you kilt. Me an' Bill Rabble jes' bought this mine. We got the papers to prove it."

"Who has?"

Hopper glowered at Jo-Jo. Jo-Jo dropped his eyes. "We left the papers in town," he muttered.

"Like hell you did." Luke's head drummed. He stepped close to Hopper, prodding him. "Dig 'em up!"

"I haven't—"

"Dig!"

"I swear to you—" Hopper began again.

Luke ground a heel on Hopper's right foot, smacked his face with a hard left hand, then jabbed him with the gun. He experienced sadistic pleasure in all this, and grinned. He saw Hopper's face floating in a mist. There was a glaze in the room. There was tinkling in the room. The room was feverish. The room had a tilting floor, on which lay a corpse that defied the law of gravity—to slide on a steep incline. With its own blood, Luke suspected, it was glued to the boards.

In a smother of pain, Luke went to work on Hopper again. Hopper screamed. Luke watched him stagger over to a safe, drop on his knees in front of it, twist the dial and presently return, blubbering like a kid. He held out the paper.

Luke snatched it, stepped back, reading with one eye and watching Jo-Jo and Hopper with the other.

Satisfied, he handed the paper to Hopper. "Strike a match and burn it," he ordered. "Burn it to a black crisp. Then stamp the ashes to soot. Miss Talmadge signed that with a man's fingers on her throat."

"I swear to you—"

"Strike that match!"

Hopper lit a match and ignited the paper. Luke stood near him shaking water from his face. His head roared. An unseen presence was jiggling chairs, moving the table. It was swinging the open safe door. It was causing Jo-Jo to grow and expand.

Luke gritted his teeth to keep the demon under control. He said to Jo-Jo, "You knifed the man in that hotel room. You'll swing."

"It wa'n't me," Jo-Jo shrieked. "Tim Whitney done it. No, not him. I mean—"

"So your tongue slipped?" Luke snarled. "Your partner, Tim Whitney, posed as Bill Rabble. Your orders were to kill the real Bill Rabble at Chillcutters Lake. You couldn't find him or else he got away. But your chance came tonight when he showed up at the Glasgow Hotel."

"That's a lie!" Jo-Jo shouted.

"Shut up or, by God, I'll smear you too."

He watched Hopper stamping the burnt paper on the floor. When Luke saw only a black stain on the rug, he crashed his gun on Hopper's temple, then rushed at Jo-Jo, knocking him down.

For a breathless minute, he sat on a chair staring at the revolver in his hands.

Then he said to himself, "You wouldn't send a man. Well, it happened—it happened to me. It won't happen any more."

Slowly, he raised the revolver by its steel barrel, using his left hand, and shoved the butt into his right hand and raised his right hand until he could feel the cold of the steel against the burning spot under the white streak.

His mouth wasn't grim any more. His face was relaxed. His chin was steady. His eyes offered an apology to the corpse. To Jo-Jo he was indifferent. But he wouldn't look at Hopper at all.

LIGHT shone in his eyes and a hard voice enunciated clearly, "Sergeant Mannister. Knife clipped a muscle on his neck. Nothing serious. He'll be fit. But what a hell of a mess in here, Miss Talmadge. This your private office?"

"Yes," she said.

"You take one arm," the hard voice continued, "and we'll help him off the floor."

"He fainted," Miss Talmadge said. "He—he did it once before."

"Nonsense!" the hard voice snapped. "A mountie never faints. Under extreme pressure, he might pass out."

"He's sick," Sue Talmage said.

"Does this look like the work of a sick man?" the hard voice growled. "He is not sick."

The hard voiced man and Sue Talmadge helped Luke over to a small couch.

"He's opening his eyes," the man said. "I tell you, he's fit. You don't know Mannister. Mannister discovered Rabble's body in that room at the Glasgow Hotel and traced the murderer here. The murderer tried to shoot him, obviously. See that gun over there on the floor? But Mannister was too quick for him. Then these other two men attacked him and—"

Sue Talmadge choked. "Mr. Noble! I don't understand it. I can't believe. He wouldn't—"

The man cut her off sharply. "Look here," he said. "Your Mr. Noble attacked Mannister. There is no other explanation."

"No, sir," Sue said. "I mean, yes, sir."

"Let's confine ourselves to the evidence," the hard man said.

"The safe door is open!" Sue gasped.

"I'm not interested in the safe," the man said coldly. "That black smudge on the floor. Now what the devil do you suppose it is?"

He strode over, stooped down, and picked

up the stub of a match. "Mannister burned a paper," he said. "Obviously, the one you signed."

"Thank God!" Sue said.

"And our efficient police force," the man added, scowling, "ably represented by Sergeant Mannister."

"Yes, sir."

The hard voiced man thrust out a foot until the toe slid under a bloody chin. Expertly, he turned the face upward. "Your Mr. Noble will remain unconscious for hours," he predicted. "The other one is in better shape."

Sue shivered. "I don't understand."

"You're only a woman," the man said. "Naturally, you wouldn't."

Sue stared at him coolly. "Obviously."

"What happened," the man said, "is this: Your Mr. Noble planned the crime himself. The other two were his accomplices."

"Impossible!" Sue gasped.

"It is not impossible. Please do not interrupt me. Mannister wouldn't strike Noble without cause. He—"

Luke opened his eyes a little wider.

"His name is Hopper, not Noble," he said. "He is the man who shot me in the head two years ago at Dawson. You're right, Inspector, he planned the whole thing."

Sue hurried back to the couch. She adjusted the pillow. "I'll believe you," she said. "But it's terrible. It's awful. Mr. Noble was so nice—"

"Hopper!" the inspector snapped. "You heard him. The name isn't Noble."

Sue ignored the hard-voiced man. She looked down at Luke. "Now you can have your relief," she said. "The inspector was so short-handed he had to come himself. He went to your room and I was there, of course." She blushed. "Then someone discovered the body in the bridal suite and we put two and two together."

"I put two and two together," the inspector growled. "Let's stick to facts."

"Yes, sir."

The inspector clanked over and glared down at Luke. He was square-built and hard. His skin, the force said, was so tough it would blunt a pin. Maybe one could drive a nail in it. The jaw was foundation rock. The eyes were tempered with steel. He had a stubborn nose.

Old Bull-Nose Inspector McGraw leaned over and drilled his eyes into Luke's. "You can leave whenever you're ready," he said. "I'll take over here myself until someone else can relieve me. You'll be admitted to hospital in Edmonton. You need a rest."

"I can't make it," Luke said. "Too late. I can't make it."

The eyes kept drilling. "You'll make it!" Bull-Nose rasped. "Orders, Mannister. Orders, you hear?"

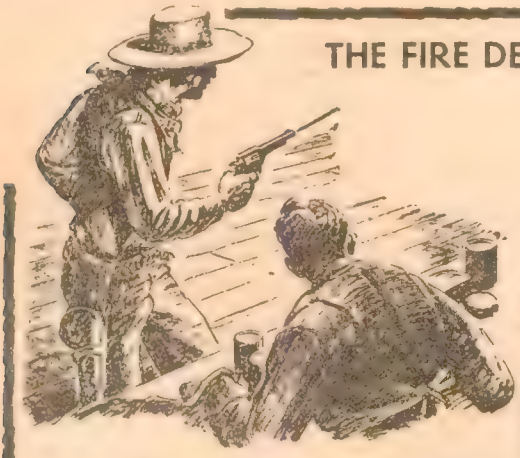
"Yes, sir."

Sue reached over and placed a hand in Luke's. "Of course, you'll go," she said. "I'm going too. Business to attend to Outside. I'll need an escort and you're just the type of man I would pick, I think."

Luke looked at her. He felt better. Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe he *could* make it.

"If you don't mind traveling with two people," he said. "A roughneck and a cop."

THE END



THE FIRE DEVILS OF MYSTERY CANYON

Action-Packed Novel of the Cattle Country

By Tom Roan

Young Cass Laramie, with a price on his head, and ex-outlaw Tuneful Sam Golightly play their own gun game in the death fight between the Mystery Canyon cattlemen and the marauding firebug killers.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

AMBUSH ON FABEN'S ISLAND

By Harry Van Demark

FABEN'S Island—known also as "No Man's Land" and Pirate Island—a sandy brush-covered strip of ground in the Rio Grande below El Paso, was the scene of a fierce battle between Texas Rangers and Mexican bandits on June 30, 1893, during which Captain Frank Jones of the Rangers met his death. It has gone down in Texas Ranger history as one of the regrettable incidents of Border days.

Captain Jones was shot to death by members of the notorious Holguin Gang, headed by three brothers, Severo, Sebastian and Priscellano Holguin, and their father, Jesus Maria. The Holguins had become fugitives from the law when they shot down a man named Howard and three other Americans on the streets of San Elizario. The murders occurred when Howard attempted to collect a salt tax from the Mexicans—a tithe which later resulted in the Salt War, one of the stirring episodes of Frontier history.

"Death to all the gringo devils!" was the word that went out along the Mexican Border. And the Rangers of Texas took up that challenge—and won—even in Boothill!

The Holguins, a hard-riding crew, grew stronger and stronger after the Howard killing. Believing themselves invincible and beyond the reach of the law, they scorned the "gringos" and blazenly flung the challenge, "Come and get us!"

The matter was brought to the attention of the Governor of Texas, who ordered Captain Jones to accept the offenders' dare and get them—dead or alive.

Feeling between Americans and Mexicans on the border ran high at this time—so high that Captain Jones was given special instructions not to antagonize peaceful Mexicans. With his beautiful young wife, Helen, Captain Jones moved into an adobe house near Ysleta.

By this time Faben's Island was known to be the hideout of the Holguin gang. Captain Jones made a quick survey of the situation and lost no time in getting into action. On the night of June 28th, with Deputy Sheriff Ed Bryant and four Rangers—Corporal Karl Kitchner, and Privates F. F. Tucker, E. D. Aten and J. W. Saunders, Captain Jones rode the length of the island to arrest two of the elder Holguins. When he arrived at their house he found that his men had fled.

The Rangers turned back toward Ysleta. As they came up the road near the old river bed, two Mexicans rode out of the brush. Suspecting that they were members of the Holguin gang, Captain Jones and his men gave chase. In their haste, the Rangers and Deputy Bryant crossed the Mexican border at Tres Jacales.

Too late, Captain Jones and his men realized they had ridden into an ambush. But the Ranger leader refused to retreat. As the lawmen rode toward a group of houses they were met by a volley of bullets.

Captain Jones' horse went down, pinning its rider to the ground. Lying there, unable to move as the firing continued, Captain Jones was shot many times.

He called out, "Boys, I'm a dead man. It's time for you fellows to go back."

Realizing that their leader was dead, the Rangers and Bryant withdrew, leaving Captain Jones' body at the mercy of the Mexicans.

(Later high members of the Masons in Texas took the matter up with the President of Mexico, who ordered the officers of the Juarez garrison to recover Captain Jones' body and surrender it to the American officials.)

NO ORDER was necessary from the Governor of Texas to direct Ranger Company D on its next move. The Rangers knew they must either capture or kill the bandits who had killed Jones if they were to retain their authority in El Paso County.

Ranger John R. Hughes, who was Captain Jones' sergeant at the time of the cul-de-sac, took charge of the situation. He ordered his men to pursue their routine duties.

In the meantime he set his "underground" to work.

Shortly before Captain Jones was slain, a

Texas Ranger—Ernest Saint Leon, son of an exiled French count—had been dishonorably discharged from the service on charges of taking food from the Ranger commissary.

Sergeant Hughes had had occasion to use Saint Leon in running down more thieves at Shafter in the Big Bend district. He respected the ex-Ranger's ability as a detective, as well as his cleverness at concealing his real personality. Saint Leon had a natural aptitude for disguises.

Hughes telegraphed Saint Leon at San Antonio, asking him to report for duty at El Paso. Saint Leon responded quickly To avoid recognition on what he knew at once would be a mission of secrecy, he resorted to his art, painted his face and hands dark brown and drew a livid scar across his face.

So excellent was his disguise that when Hughes and another Ranger boarded the train at Fort Hancock, just outside El Paso, neither recognized him.

They rode into El Paso, in doubt as to whether Saint Leon had kept his appointment. Hughes had arranged to meet the ex-Ranger in the cupola of the Federal Building—and when he arrived at the rendezvous his man was there.

Quickly, secret plans were laid for running down the slayers of Captain Jones.

Saint Leon obtained work as a cowhand on various ranches. There he gathered valuable information about the bandits. He learned that the real leader of the Holguin gang, Severo, had gone deep into the interior of Mexico, two brothers, Sebastian and Priscellano, however, were still held in the Juaraz jail by the Mexican authorities.

Saint Leon learned that Sebastian and Priscellano were about to be freed from jail. He immediately set out for Tres Jacales, where a mammoth celebration was being arranged to welcome the Holguins back home. There, unrecognized, he joined in the festivities.

Saint Leon was always ready for adventure. In his Ranger days he had been known as "Diamond Dick," because of the large diamonds he wore and his love for flamboyant clothes.

Nothing could have appealed to him more than to be on hand for the Holguin brothers homecoming. He knew there would be trouble and he wanted to be in on it.

His dismissal from the Ranger force had not bothered him. Perhaps he felt it was justified. At least his sympathies were still with that intrepid band of Texas lawmen, though doubtless the money promised him by Hughes for duty well performed had something to do with it.

The Holguins had not been long in Tres Jacales before someone started an argument. During the fight that ensued "Diamond Dick" Saint Leon, from a point of vantage near the contestants, killed both of the Holguins.

His mission accomplished, he reported back to Sergeant Hughes. All told he was largely responsible for the death of eighteen members of the Holguin gang that day. The missing Severo was never heard of again along the Border. Rumors filtered back that he met his death in a fight far to the South of the Border, but there was no confirmation of this.

Saint Leon was a good man, well liked and admired by the Rangers as well as other border lawmen. But his devil-may-care nature and his unrestrained boasting led to his undoing. He was shot and killed at Socorro during a drunken brawl.

Captain Jones was buried where he fell on Pirate Island. His grave is marked by a stone under a giant mulberry tree.

The Holguins, a hard-riding crew, grew stronger after the Howard killing.

THE COYCTE KID —FIGHTING MAN!

Novel of a Battling Coward

By Walt Coburn

Pat Owen's six-shooter roared and the judge's screaming stopped.

Young Lin Marshall prayed for only one thing before the law took him on the first lap of his tough trail to the Yuma pen: that somehow he could help send to the hottest pit of hell the yellow-eyed bushwhacker he'd been forced to call "Dad!"

CHAPTER ONE

Children of the Range

YOUNG LIN MARSHALL stood in the middle of the schoolyard while the other kids formed a ring around him. Big Dutch Rucker laid a chip on Lin's shoulder and then stepped back and shoved his kid brother Bud toward Lin.

"Knock it off, Bud," Dutch said and spat into the dust. "That Lin kid's yella as a coyote's belly. If he starts to put up his dukes hit 'im like I showed you. He'll double up like an empty gunnysack. When he goes down kick his teeth into his throat!"

Bud Rucker hung back at first. "He's older'n me Dutch."

"You're thirteen," Dutch said. "How old are you, kid?"

Lin Marshall stood there in his clean cotton shirt and faded levis bare-headed and barefooted because his old man said it was a waste of hard-earned money buying shoes for a kid that wore shoe leather out like paper. The old man reckoned that if one of his old Stetson hats padded with lampwick wasn't good enough, the kid could go bareheaded. Lin had found head lice in the sweatband of the old hat and thrown it away.

Lin's face had drained of color so that now the freckles looked like warts. Inside he felt sick. This was his first day at school. The old man had fetched him over from the two-bit ranch he'd squatted on near the Mexican border, Lin riding bareback on a pack mule.

"Here's that whelp of mine your danged school board was hollerin' about bein' kep' outa school," Marshall had said. "And, by grab, don't be keepin' him after hours to do your schoolhouse chores. He's got a day's work to ketch up with when he gits home."

The schoolmarm at Manzanita was Arizona born and reared and a cowman's daughter, at that. She said, "Such as tending your moonshine still. Or burning your Figure 8 on some sleeper-marked maverick."

"You're too smart, lady, to be wastin' your time at a henyard schoolmarm job." Van Marshall had hooked a leg across his saddle

horn and his bloodshot eyes had looked her over like he was sizing up a filly he might buy. "Not bad lookin', neither, if a man likes 'em skinny. Put on about thirty pounds of hard taller and—"

"What's your son's name?" Mamie Flynn had red hair and freckles. She stood in the doorway of the little adobe schoolhouse at the edge of Manzanita town straddling the Mexican border. She looked at the lanky man on horseback as though he was something giving off an evil odor.

"His name," Van Marshall said, "is Lin. Lin is short for Lindsay. If you want his history, listen to this. His full name is Robert Lindsay. Named fer his father, who was Bob Lindsay, a renegade that got shot to death somewheres. I married the Widder Lindsay and that give the kid the name of Robert Lindsay Marshall. Whittled it down to Lin Marshall. When she up and died on me I got big-hearted and kept her brat and raised him fer my own. Even workin' full time he ain't worth the grub he puts away. Now your school board gits busy and tells me I got to send the kid to school. He'll never be nothin' but a forty-a-month cowhand. He kin read brands without goin' to school. Count what change he gits back when he buys hisself a new ketch rope."

"How old is Lin?"

"You got me there, lady. Old enough to wean him off his mammy's apron strings to grab the saddle strings and pull hisself up onto a pony. Fifteen, mebby sixteen. Kinda runty fer his age. Like a wind-bellied poddie bull calf left mammyless by the lobo wolves along this flea-bit Mexican border." Van Marshall grinned.

Mamie Flynn was reminded of a lobo wolf baring its fangs. Marshall had the pointed jaw of a wolf, and his eyes were yellow. His looks bore out the tough reputation he had fetched down from Wyoming. With Lin, he had located on a place near the Border known as the Deserted Cabin Ranch. There was something evil about Marshall.

"Anything more you got to stick your nose into before you let this kid into your 'dobe schoolhouse?"

"No," Mamie Flynn said. When she caught sight of the first of her pupils coming she wanted to offer up a prayer of thanks.

Van Marshall saw the kids coming, a few on horseback, others in rigs drawn by gentle old plugs. Cow country kids of all ages and sizes. The Mexican kids on foot were racing the slower rigs.

He scowled. "Just when we was commencin' to git acquainted." He swung his long leg with its stiff thorn-and-brush-scarred leather chaps down and kicked his boot into its tapadero-covered stirrup.

"And I was goin' to give you a drink of this good corn likker!" He pulled a beer bottle from his chaps pocket, pulled the cork, tilted the bottle and drank. He smacked his lips and shoved the bottle into the pocket of his chaps.

"You bear down on this kid," he grinned. "Beat it into his hide, if he can't learn no other way. He's used to a double rope. Lazy, like his daddy was. Ornery and sneakin'. Gutless. Bob Lindsay was a rank coward. The kid takes after him. If he's gotta be kep' after school, lemme know. I'll lope over an' set with you."

Van Marshall laughed at his humor. He whirled his horse and raked his spurs. He was riding a bronc and the half-broken gelding dropped his head and pitched. Marshall was a good bronc rider and he grinned back across his shoulder as the horse squealed and pitched. Then he yanked off his hat and fanned the horse's neck and never tightened a bridle rein more than to take up the slack.

It was a show-off ride. Then the bronc's head lifted and the spurs bit deep and the animal stampeded and horse and rider went out of sight in the sparse mesquite in a cloud of dust.

YOUNG Lin had stood there ashamed and tongue-tied and sick inside with the fear of his old man. Ashamed because he had let Marshall talk like that to the red-haired little schoolmarm who had faced him high-chinned and unafraid.

She had walked out to where Lin stood barefooted beside his pack mule. Her hand took Lin's and shook it as though she were shaking hands with a man.

"Don't let it bother you too much, Lin," the woman said.

A big tow-headed boy, sixteen but nearly man-grown, rode up on a three-year-old bronc that was hardly bridlewise. The boy's washed-out blue eyes looked almost colorless in the early morning sun.

"Who was that bronc-stomper just fanned out through the mesquites, Miss Flynn?" His voice was changing. It broke in tone in the middle of a word.

"That was Van Marshall, from the Deserted Cabin Ranch. This is Lin Marshall. Lin, this is Gus Rucker."

"Dutch." The overgrown youth sat a horse heavily. "Call me Dutch. You know the Hayhook Rucker outfit. That's my kid brother Bud matchin' a race with them greaser kids. Miss Flynn won't let me pack a ketch rope on account of the last greaser kid I roped got clumsy and busted a leg."

"Dutch," Mamie Flynn said quietly, "is the school bully, Lin. He'll do his best and his worst to run you off. Put up your horse, Gus.

And don't go grand-standing. This is a school yard, not the rodeo grounds."

The others came up. Bud Rucker was tow-headed like Gus. Both Ruckers wore boots and new levis and denim brush jumpers. They unsaddled and tied their horses at a feed rack in the shade of a thatched roofed ramada.

Among the youngsters was Ramona Owen, a girl about fourteen; slim, quick-moving, with black hair and long-lashed gray-blue eyes. She sat her chunky roan pony well and was the first one unsaddled. She took good care of her pony. Her father was Sheriff Pat Owen. He had married a Mexican girl whose father had been Jefe of Sonora. Mona was the prettiest, smartest girl in school, but no teacher's pet. On the contrary, if devilment was going on, Mona had a hand in it.

"Tie that sore-backed pack mule somewheres in the brush," Dutch Rucker told Lin.

"What's your name?" Mona said to young Marshall. "I'm Mona Owen."

"Lin." His ears reddened. "Lin Marshall."

Dutch said, "His old man is that cattle-stealin' whiskey peddler that squatted on the Deserted Cabin Ranch. You seen him makin' that show-off bronc ride in front of the schoolmarm. They'll hang Marshall with his own hungry loop one of these nights. Tie that pack mule out in the brush, kid."

"Tie your mule alongside my Rabbit pony, Lin," Mona Owen said.

"That's Bud's place," Dutch said.

"Tie your mule, Lin—"

Dutch grabbed Bud's hackamore rope, kicked Lin's mule in the belly and tied Bud's dun pony next to Mona's chunky roan.

"Anybody kin be slow," Dutch grinned.

Mona's blue-gray eyes were bright with anger. She smiled at Lin.

"I'll hold your mule, Lin," her voice was brittle, "while you untie Bud Rucker's dun pony."

The other kids gathered. The red-haired schoolmarm had gone inside the adobe schoolhouse. Lin stood there in the faded old blue cotton shirt and levis he had spent hours washing last night. Save for the Mexicans, he was the only barefooted, hatless boy. As he cut a desperate look around, he found not a friendly eye among the crowd. Kids are cruel. Lin Marshall had never been among youngsters until now. He'd lived among men. Men like Van Marshall. Tough, whiskey-drinking, profane, quarrelsome men who fought without rules. Sometime they used guns and when that happened Lin had hidden in the brush until the fighting was over.

But this was different. For the first time in his life he was thrown in among kids his own age. He didn't know how to act or what to say. Their talk left him tongue-tied. The quirtings and double-ropings Marshall had given him had whipped the courage out of him. He had never learned to fight back.

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You couldn't fight a grown man with a rawhide quirt. He had never fought a boy his own age. There had never been any boys at the cow camps and renegade hideouts or round-ups where Lin Marshall had done a man's work and had been kicked around since he could remember.

The kids formed a quick circle.

"Fight!" shrilled a small voice, calling the school stragglers. "Fight!"

CHAPTER TWO

Fight!

INSIDE the schoolhouse Mamie Flynn heard the shout and looked through the doorway. Then she drew back before they saw her. She was sick with pity for young Marshall. But if she went out and broke it up, that would condemn the new boy. He would be branded a teacher's pet, an added burden to the load he already packed.

Sweat broke out on Lin's tanned face, dampened the wiry hair that needed trimming badly. He was bewildered, rather than scared. Mona Owen jerked the mule's hackamore rope from his hand. Big Dutch Rucker picked up a stick, put it on Lin's shoulder, then grabbed Bud and shoved Bud at Lin.

"How old are you, kid?" Dutch repeated.

"I don't know."

"The paddle-footed dummy don't know his own age. Take to 'im, Bud."

"He's bigger'n me." The reluctant Bud was sidling off.

Dutch grabbed his young brother and flung him headlong at Lin. Bud's arms flailed wildly. The chip was knocked off Lin's shoulder. Lin had backed away clumsily.

"He knocked it off!" Mona Owen's voice was merciless. "Fight him, Lin!"

Lin shook his head. "I don't know how to fight."

Dutch gave Bud another shove. Bud stumbled into Lin and it wasn't until they went down in a tangle that anybody noticed the jackknife in young Rucker's fist. Its three-inch blade bit into Lin's thigh. He let out a yelp of pain and they rolled over in the dust that swirled up and choked Lin's nostrils and open mouth. Then he was on his feet, running. Dutch tripped him.

"He's got a knife!" Mona Owen shrilled. "Bud's got a knife!"

Mamie Flynn came out of the schoolhouse on a run. She had to turn her back on fist-fighting. But a knife was another matter and it gave her all the excuse she needed to save young Marshall from a fight for which he had no appetite or skill or courage to meet.

But before she could get there Bud had the knife blade closed and Dutch had grabbed hold of him and taken the knife and shoved it into his own pocket.

The stab wound was bleeding, staining the faded blue denim. But Lin hardly felt the pain. He scrambled to his feet and stood there dazedly, sweating and blinking the dust from his eyes.

DUTCH saw the schoolmarm coming. "Squeal some more, Mona. Blab your mouth. Let that whiskey-peddler's whelp tuck his yellow coyote tail between his legs and hide behind teacher's skirts. Go ahead! Squeal some more!"

Dutch's voice was low. Even so it changed its pitch and broke. He didn't look at Mona Owen. He was standing behind Bud, holding Bud to keep him from running away from whatever punishment the schoolmarm would deal out.

"You keep your trap shut, Bud. You never had no knife. Savvy?"

Pain did not bother young Marshall. He was used to it. He could take a quirting that left raw welts and never whimper. He saw the strange look in the eyes of Mona Owen. Then the schoolmarm came up and she stood there looking at them all.

"Now, what's this about a knife?" Her voice was quiet. She was looking at the blood-stain on Lin's overalls.

"I fell down," Lin said. "Mebby there's a busted bottle there in the dirt and I cut my leg on it. I didn't see any knife."

Lin wasn't much of a hand at lying but he did his best. Dutch was quick-witted enough to pick it up from there.

"Bud and the new kid Lin got to rasslin'. There's plenty busted bottles around. Mona saw the cut on his leg and commenced givin' up head. She's always startin' somethin' she hands over to some kid to finish."

Mona smiled a little. She had untied Bud's dun pony and now she tied Lin's mule next to her fat roan pony. "Better catch your pony, Bud," she said sweetly, "before he drags that hackamore rope home and sets you afoot."

"Empty your pockets, Bud." Mamie Flynn's voice was sharp.

"Do what teacher says," Dutch grinned. "I'll ketch your pony. Or you kin ride Mona's Rabbit and she kin help me break this bronc I got to ride double."

"I'd rather walk home," Mona said quickly.

"With the other Mexicans?" Dutch grinned. He spoke in a low tone as he brushed past her under the thatched roof of the ramada.

There was the sharp spatting sound of an open handed slap. It left a red blotch on big Dutch Rucker's cheek. Mona came out from under the shade of the ramada.

Mamie Flynn knew when she was defeated. She left Bud standing there, grinning, his pockets pulled inside out, and went back to the little adobe schoolhouse. There were times, the teacher told herself, when she felt like the keeper at a zoo.

"You lied," Dutch Rucker stood looking down at Lin, "to save that coyote hide of yourn. But Bud is goin' to give you that lickin' after school this evenin'. He don't need no Barlow to whittle you down to his size, neither. He'll whup you or I'll kick his pants all the way back to the Rucker Hayhook ranch."

"One of these times, Dutch," Mona said, "you won't be there to back Bud. And some kid half Bud's size will really work him over. I could do it, myself."

"Bud wouldn't hit a girl. He's a Rucker."

"And the Hayhook Ruckers," Mona chanted, "are all tough as a boot. Packed six-shooters to school till the teacher took your guns away. You come sashayin' up on a jughead colt that you call a bronc—"

"I suppose you kin ride that bronc," Dutch leered, "just like you kin whup my brother Bud!"

"I could, but I'd rather watch Lin do it. Lin will ride your jugheaded colt after he's whipped your Bud. Won't you, Lin?"

The challenge was there once more in her smile. Her blue eyes merciless.

Lin nodded. He felt his belly crawl; he wanted to turn and run; get away from the eyes that watched him. The cruel eyes of kids his own age. The eyes of this black-haired girl who had gotten him into this nightmare. Even the Deserted Cabin Ranch and the old man's quirting would be better than this school business.

A girl with twin braids the color of new corn silk pushed Dutch and Bud aside and walked to where Lin stood. She was about sixteen, but seemed older now. There was fury in her eyes.

The girl said, "I'll get some bandages and a bottle of carbolic from the teacher. You go over to the well house and start washing that blood off. I'll be along in a minute. You needn't be bashful about it. I'm studying to be a trained nurse. I'm Hilda Rucker. That was my brother Bud stabbed you like he was some Mexican. Don't hold it against me, Lin. And don't let Mona get you into more trouble. She's not worth fighting about—the little Irish-Mex!"

"Holler for Teacher!" Dutch's voice cracked. "Before there's a hair pullin'!"

Mona Owen's cheeks were flushed and she clenched her small hands into fists.

Then the school bell was ringing and Mamie Flynn was standing there in the doorway clanging the wooden-handled bell.

The Mexicans were laughing and shouting. They loved the musical sound of the bell. The others broke into little groups. Mona Owen walked alone towards the school, high-headed as a young colt. A smile was on her red lips and anger blazed in her eyes.

"I'll tell the teacher you've gone to the well house," said Hilda Rucker. "Wash the blood away. I'll be right there."

Lin Marshall would have gotten on his pack mule and headed for the Deserted Cabin Ranch. But Hilda had gone into the adobe schoolhouse, to speak with Miss Flynn. Before Lin could get to his mule Hilda came running out with a tin box containing a first aid kit. There was nothing for Lin to do now but go on over to the small adobe house built around the well. When he got there Hilda had pulled up a bucketful of water and was dippering it into a tin basin on the wash bench below the two big clean roller towels.

ALL that day Lin kept thinking of the fight that was coming, and the fear that crawled around inside his belly was more sickening than the pain in his swollen thigh where Hilda Rucker's bandage was binding too tightly. He went through the day on an empty belly because he hadn't fetched a lunch to school; he was too bashful and proud to accept food from Miss Flynn. Hilda tried to share her lunch with him, too, but he got so red-faced with embarrassment that she didn't insist. Then Mona took a red apple from her lunch pail and walked toward him.

Dutch Rucker swaggered past as Mona shoved the apple at Lin where he was watering his mule. Dutch grabbed the apple before Lin had a chance to either reach for it or shake his head in refusal.

"Anybody kin be slow," Dutch grinned, and took half the apple apart in one huge bite.

After school, when they formed a big ring and Lin had to stand flat-footed and face Bud Rucker, he was weak-kneed. When he tried to get out of the way of Bud's wild rush, Lin's feet wouldn't move. Bud butted him in the stomach and knocked his wind out. Lin doubled up and went over backwards, Bud on top.

Marshall fought blindly, with frantic, desperate strength. He rolled over on top of Bud; he had the fight won then if he'd known enough to take it. But he let go and tried to scramble to his feet. His injured leg gave way and Dutch kicked him. Young Marshall fell down again, Dutch grabbed Bud by the back of his shirt and threw him on top of Lin.

"Lick the hell outa 'im, Bud, or I'll boot you all the way home!"

A strong hand grabbed Dutch by the shirt collar and yanked him backwards onto the ground. Mamie Flynn had a rawhide whip in her hand. Her eyes were hard.

"Let 'em alone, Dutch, or I'll tan your hide."

Dutch lifted a big arm to protect his face. But he did not try to get up.

"I'll referee this scrap," the school mistress said.

Mamie was the daughter of Red Jim Flynn, whose little cow outfit had been droughted-out when Mamie was a kid keeping house for her widowed father. Jim Flynn drank himself to death as Mamie worked her way through school. She waited on table at the Hotel to pay for her board and room, kept books at the Mercantile and Drug Store to earn money for clothes. The school board had given her the Manzanita school for her graduation present. Now she was in her early twenties, old enough to big-sister the pupils who called her Miss Mamie. Overgrown Dutch was the only kid who did not respect and champion her with a fierce loyalty.

Had she taken over a few minutes ago, she might have given Lin enough self-confidence to win his fight. But now Bud was a-straddle of his back and had shoved Lin's face into the dirt and ground sand into his mouth. He was gouging and clawing at Lin's eyes.

"Holler!" Bud snarled. "Holler you're licked! You licked?" Bud's hands gripped Marshall's hair and yanked.

Mamie Flynn started to pull Bud off. Dutch moved up on her from behind and yanked the whip from her hand and jumped back, grinning.

"Even a schoolmarm," big Dutch leered, "kin be slow."

CHAPTER THREE

Shadow of the Law

NOBODY saw Neal Walker ride up. Walker was Stock Inspector under Sheriff Owen. About thirty years old, short, broad-shouldered and lean-flanked, Walker had a blunt jaw and puckered gray eyes.

He reined up and leaned forward, gloved hands resting on the duckbill saddle horn. A hard-lipped grin was on his wide mouth.

"Playin' games?" Walker had a lazy drawl. "Or you puttin' down a mutiny?"

Mamie flushed. Walker's grin did nothing to smooth her ruffled temper. Her small, strong hands were bunched into white-knuckled fists.

Dutch Rucker looked scared. The whole cow country knew Walker was "stuck on" Mamie. He had quietly bought the old Flynn ranch and slowly built it into a good outfit. His enemies said Walker had hid behind his Stock Inspector's badge to burn the old Flynn F brand on too many mavericks. The Hayhook Rucker outfit had tried to get Walker's badge taken away. But Owen had flatly told Hayhook Herman Rucker to go to hell. That he was training Walker for the sheriff job that he aimed to hand down when the time came.

Walker saw the rawhide whip in Dutch Rucker's big hand and felt his own temper slipping its dally-wraps. Then he remembered what fetched him here.

"You better give your teacher her whip, Dutch. Then dust off that kid brother Bud of yourn and git for home. Hayhook Herman's been shot. Somebody dry-gulched him last night and didn't do a very good job of it. He tied himself on his saddle and his horse fetched him in this mornin'. He was still alive, last I heard. But you and Bud better git there quick."

Dutch dropped the whip in the dust. Bud looked as though he was going to bawl.

"That damned Van Marshall done it." Dutch's voice was thick.

Hilda Rucker walked over to where Walker sat his horse. The inspector's face reddened and he tugged at his hatbrim. Somehow you never thought of Hilda as belonging to the Hayhook Rucker outfit.

"Is my father dead?" Hilda's voice was calm. Her eyes, blue as the Arizona sky, had a searching look that was disconcerting.

"No, he ain't dead, Hilda. But he's in bad shape. He lost a lot of blood. He'd have been dead long ago if he wasn't so big and tough." He forced a grin. "Here's where that nurse trainin' of yours might come in mighty handy . . . if you can get there before it's too late. . . ."

Hilda never took her eyes from the stock inspector. When she spoke nobody but Neal Walker heard her.

"Did you shoot him, Neal?"

His face lost its flushed look. The lines around the square corners of his wide mouth deepened.

"What made you ask that, Hilda?"

"You've trailed him often enough. Trying to catch him rustling cattle. You weren't at your ranch last night. You weren't in town. I know. Because I rode there to see you." Hilda's cheeks were stained now with a faint blush.

Walker shifted uneasily in his saddle. He did not want to read what was there so plainly to be seen. Hilda was sixteen. Her mother was fifteen when she quit hash-slinging to marry Herman Rucker. Hilda was no schoolgirl. Another few years and she would be matured and as handsome as her mother. Hilda spent most of her time helping the

over-worked cow country doctor at Manzanita.

Now she smiled. "I was trying to find you," she said quietly, "because I overheard father say that if you ever caught up with him, it would be your hard luck. I hoped to head you off before you blundered into a bushwhacker trap. That was the reason I wanted to see you, Neal."

Hilda turned and walked away, leaving Walker feeling foolish. She got her team hooked to her old buckboard and drove away. Dutch and Bud had already gone, dust moving fast in their wake as they headed across the mesquite and cactus strewn flat desert.

WALKER was looking narrowly at Lin Marshall. Lin stood barefooted in the dust, wiping blood, dirt and sweat from his face. The bandage on the knife wound had slipped and the leg of his faded levis was soaking up the blood like a blotter.

"You're Van Marshall's kid."

"Yes, sir. I'm Lin Marshall."

"I didn't know you went to school. Get your horse, Lin. I've got to take you back to town with me. We've bin lookin' for you, boy. Sheriff's got Van Marshall in jail. He's charged with shootin' Rucker. He wouldn't tell us where you was. Who shot you in the leg, Lin. Was it Herman Rucker?"

Mamie Flynn stepped up alongside the kid. "You're not going to lock this boy up. Bud Rucker stabbed Lin in the leg this morning. Marshall brought Lin here to school. You're not much of a detective, Neal Walker."

The man grinned faintly. "You git no argument outa me there, ma'am. You know, if you wore steel-rimmed specs, and looked down over 'em, with that tone of voice you'd be a shore old maid schoolmarm. . . ."

Mamie picked up the rawhide whip Dutch had dropped. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled. "It takes more than steel-rimmed specs, mister, to make a schoolmarm. And more than a tin badge to make a stock detective."

Walker's grin widened. He lifted both gloved hands. "Turn 'em loose and lock the school door, Mamie. You better come along for a sorta witness. Sheriff Pat's roundin' up everybody that's seen Van Marshall since yesterday. And you kin mebbyso do Lin some good. The boy is goin' to shore need a friend at court."

Mona Owen had her fat roan pony saddled. "Why couldn't you have put it off an hour, Neal? I had a bet made with Dutch. Now we won't know if Lin can ride that jughead colt Dutch calls a bronc. I bet Dutch a new hat."

As Lin swung up bareback on the pack mule he had ridden to school, Walker asked him if he could ride the mile to the Doc's house. Lin reckoned he could. He was wary now, close-mouthed and on guard—like Van Marshall had taught him to be.

"Where was you and your father last night?" Neal Walker asked as he rode alongside him.

"My father is dead. Van Marshall is my step dad."

"All right. Where was you and Van last night?"

"I'll do my talkin' in court," Lin Marshall said. "I don't have to answer your questions, mister."

"Marshall's got you trained, ain't he?"

"Quirt-broke." Lin wasn't scared. This was something he savvied. Something he knew how to fight.

"Let him alone, Neal." Mamie rode up alongside the stock inspector. "I don't want to despise you."

Lin's mule lagged. Mona Owen rode her fat roan pony alongside him. She reached out and grabbed Lin's hand and hung onto it.

Lin felt foolish. But when he tried to pull his hand away she hung on tighter.

"There's a reform school." Mona's voice was a whisper. "It's a tough place. Like the pen at Yuma. That's where they'll send you, Lin."

Lin looked at her. Her eyes were shining. "Yeah." He forced a grin. "I've heard all about reform schools. They claim they learn kids a trade there. But all the kids learn is how to be tougher."

"You scared, Lin?"

"No, I don't reckon I'm scared."

"Did you help Marshall shoot Rucker?"

"I'll save that for the judge an' jury."

"Then you know about it? You know—"

"I know enough to keep my mouth shut," the boy said quietly.

"Dutch lied when he said you were a coward."

"No. Dutch was right." Young Marshall's voice was low. "I was scared to stand up to Bud and slug it out. And I'm bigger than Bud. I was scared. I'm what Dutch Rucker called me. A yellow-bellied coyote."

"Hilda said you were brave. She said you never let out a whimper when she poured carbolic into that knife stab. I suppose you think Hilda is your girl now . . . just because—"

"No."

"She calls me an Irish-Mex. She says I'm a half-breed greaser. I hate Hilda!" Mona spat the older girl's name.

LIN grinned. Her grip on his hand tightened.

"I'll show you," Mona whispered. "You needn't laugh. Sheriff Pat Owen is my daddy. I can swipe his jail keys. I'll have you a

horse saddled. You be ready to go at midnight."

"Hold on," Lin began. "Gosh sakes, you can't—"

"Hilda Rucker can't do that! Nurse? Who wants to be a nurse? I'll show her how an Irish-Mex half-breed brat can do something that'd scare her to death. You think I can't! Maybe you haven't got the guts to break jail? Mebby you *are* a coward. You scared?"

"No." Lin wasn't grinning now. His eyes were narrowed. "No, I'm not scared," he said slowly. "They'll never send me to reform school. I'd rather be shot. But I'm not lettin' you swipe any jail keys to git me out, either. And, anyhow, tonight is too soon."

"Why? Why is it too soon?"

"I've got a debt to pay off. And I'll never git a better chance. Since I kin remember, Van Marshall has quirted me around and cussed me. He killed my mother with his drunken abuse. He's cussed my dead father for a coward. I've heard him brag, when he was drunk, how he was the man who shot and killed Bob Lindsay. Bob Lindsay was my father. I'm gettin' a chance now to hang Marshall, or send him to the pen, anyhow. Even if the law sends me over the road with him, I'll put Marshall in the pen at Yuma. Kin you keep your mouth shut, now?"

Mona gripped his hand like a small steel trap. Her gray-blue eyes shining like polished steel. "I can keep my mouth shut, Lin. And I can get you out of jail before they take you away. You've got to let me! You've got to! You understand?"

"Because you hate Hilda?" Lin forced a grin.

"Because I hate Hilda Rucker? Because . . . do you hate me, Lin?"

"Hate you? Gosh, no. You're—you're—I don't know what," he floundered.

"Either you hate somebody or you like 'em a lot. You like me that much, Lin?"

"I guess I like you a lot."

"I can't run away with you. Dad would send Walker to fetch us both back. Always when I run off, he sends Neal after me. And they make a big joke out of it. But it wouldn't be any joke if I ran away with you. They'd send you over the road to the reform school, sure. But I'll wait for you to come back, Lin. Cross my heart and hope to die if I don't. Years, even. You got to promise you'll come back to me, Lin. Cross your heart and you hope to die if you don't!"

"I'll come back, Mona." Lin said slowly. "I'll come back to you, Mona. But I won't be a kid any longer."

"Cross your heart and hope to die," the girl repeated.

Lin crossed his heart and hoped to die. . . .

Walker and Mamie Flynn had reined up in front of the doctor's neat adobe house. The doc dressed and bandaged the knife stab. He said Lin could thank Hilda for doing a first rate job.

"She'll be a great nurse some day," the sawbones said. "Or a doctor in her own right. I'd like to send Hilda to a good medical school, but she'll probably fall in love with some forty-a-month cowhand and marry him and the medical profession will lose a good nurse or woman doctor. There you are, son. You'll not even limp tomorrow. Even the scar won't show a year from now."

"Takin' me to jail now?" Lin asked.

"Van Marshall might kill you if I locked you in with him. It's a two-bit, two-cell calaboose we got here at Manzanita. Marshall would kill you if you happen to be an eye witness to Rucker's bushwhacking. There's a spare room at Sheriff Pat's house. Or you kin bunk with me. I kin hobble you with leg irons and handcuff you. Or you kin give me your word of honor that you won't try to escape and I'll not even lock the door."

"You think my word is that good?" Lin asked.

"If I wasn't plumb certain of it, Lin, I wouldn't ask you for it."

This was the first time in his young life anybody had treated him like a man. It put a lump in Lin's throat. His eyes were a little misted when he looked at the hand held out. He gripped it, hard.

He realized then that he had committed himself into custody. He could not run away now. He could have broken jail. But he could never break his word to this man.

"That settles it." Lin said suddenly.

"Settles what, pardner?"

Lin grinned. "I kinda had it in mind to bust outa jail—after Van Marshall got tried and sentenced. I'd rather be dead than to go to that reform school."

"I don't blame you. I was booked for there once, myself, when I was a kid. Pat Owen got me paroled into his custody. This judge is tough. Hayhook Herman Rucker hoisted him to where he sits now, so maybe he'll throw the book at you. In which case, our bet's off. Miss Mamie Flynn would never look at me again if I let you go over the road. And I'd hate like hell to lose her respect. But that's huntin' for a shallow crossin' before we reach the river. You won't go over the road to any reform school. But it had better be my jail keys and not Sheriff Pat's that Mona swipes when you do git locked up for safe keepin' under reform school sentence."

Neal Walker grinned at Lin's embarrassment.

"The breeze carried it," Walker explained. "But Mamie Flynn don't talk. And I never listen too hard. You two got kinda excited.

Next time, remember the sound of a whisper carries."

CHAPTER FOUR

Twins from Hell

SHERIFF PAT OWEN was awaiting them in his big office at the front end of the adobe jail. A steel door separated the office from the building's two cells. The cells had separate doors. When the steel door was swung back anybody in the office could see into both cells. The prisoners could see into the office, too. But close the steel door and the view of the cells was shut off; the cell block became sound proof.

The steel door was open now. Van Marshall, the only prisoner, stood at his barred door, a grin on his face.

Lin met his yellow-eyed glare without flinching, even before he took notice of Sheriff Pat Owen.

"Where'd you pick up the boy, Neal?" Owen had a whiskey voice. He was a paunchy man with thick gray hair and a skin reddened from sunburn and the quart a day he allowed himself. He stood five feet eight in his shop-made boots but looked shorter on account of his burly build. He'd gone to seed. He wanted to pin the sheriff's badge on Walker and sit back in a game of Seven-up with his cronies in the back room of the Legal Tender Saloon and enjoy the rest of his days in comfort.

"At school," Neal Walker said. "Marshall took him there this mornin'. I sent the Rucker kids home. Book young Lin as a material witness, Pat, and I'll ride close herd on him. He'll bunk with me at my place."

Owen shook his head. "Judge Gerald don't drink likker or use tobacco in any shape and he don't use cuss words or gamble. He drove a buggy team till they dropped in the harness, gittin' to a camp meetin' to join in the psalm singin'. Gerald has this kid charged as accessory to the crime that'll be murder if Rucker cashes in his dirty chips. I've got orders to lock the button in the cell next to his old man's. Hell of a note, ain't it?"

"Somethin' stinks bad, Pat."

"Kinda rotten bad, Neal." Owen reached in his desk for a bottle. "Drink?"

Walker shook his head. "I'm takin' Lin to the restaurant for supper and then to the barber shop. I'm buyin' him a hat and boots and what clothes he needs. I'll collect the damages from that big bankroll we taken off Marshall when we arrested him. I'll fetch the boy back and lock him in the other cell. Lin's got sense enough to stay far enough back from the partition to keep his old man from getting at his throat. I'll bunk here in the office. Marshall done any talkin'?"

"Only to Gerald," the sheriff said. "The judge sent me out for a quart for Marshall while they talked through the bars. Take a look at that grin on the prisoner's face. He could be bluffin', Neal. But he acts like he had an ace in the hole. Take the boy along. If he gives you the slip, you won't lose your badge. . . ."

Lin, barbered, bathed, wearing his first Stetson hat and dressed in new levis and a blue flannel shirt, sat across the restaurant table with a platter of ham, eggs and spuds. There was a look in the boy's eyes that had never been there until now.

"I won't rabbit on you, mister," young Marshall said.

"My name's Neal. There's no rabbit blood in you, pardner. But it'll take all the guts you got to go on through with it. I'll be there in the office to see your old man don't get to you. And I'll be alongside you durin' the trial. You're my prisoner, savvy? But that ain't what I'm drivin' at. It's ag'in' everything you ever bin taught, Lin, to squeal. You kin take the witness stand and your sworn testimony will send Marshall to the pen. But it goes ag'in' the grain, don't it?"

"Yeah."

"And that's where you're goin' to need your guts."

"Yes, sir."

"The name's Neal." The inspector grinned. "Me'n you are pardners."

"I'll tackle it the best I know how, Neal."

"I won't ask no more than that, pardner."

They pushed back their chairs and Lin put on his new Stetson hat.

They heard the sounds of men on horseback in the street. Big Dutch Rucker swaggered into the restaurant. He had a filled cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter buckled around his thick middle and his hat was pulled down at a tough angle. His spurs jingled.

HIS eyes narrowed when he saw Lin and the stock inspector. He walked forward with a swagger and halted, legs spread wide, his hand on his gun.

"Hayhook Herman Rucker," he said, "is dead. He gimme my orders before he kicked the bucket. Me'n Bud will carry them orders out. Bud's packin' a gun now. He ain't too young to use it, neither. The Hayhook's mine now. Mine an' Bud's. Why ain't you got this Lin Marshall kid in jail, Walker? He helped his old man kill my dad. I got it in writin' and my father's name and Hayhook brand signed to it. What's this Lin Marshall whelp a-doin' prancin' around free in new duds? He was barefooted and ragged and never owned a hat in his life, last I seen him. You lock this kid up right now, Walker!" Rucker's face was red. He stank of booze.

"You're kinda young to be hittin' the booze, Dutch." Walker was grinning faintly. "Steppin' right into the boots of Herman, too, givin' them orders." Walker had to look up into Rucker's bloodshot eyes. Dutch was that much taller.

The inspector put on his hat, nodded to Lin and they walked past Rucker through the door to the street. It was dark and fifteen or twenty saddled horses were at the hitch-racks in front of the town's six saloons. Dutch Rucker had fetched his tough Hayhook cow-hands to town. As they passed a saloon Lin saw Bud Rucker at the end of the bar, holding a glass of beer. There was a grin on the kid's face. The boy was getting drunk.

"Miz Rucker," Neal Walker said, "is a good woman. Hilda taken after her mother. Bud might turn out all right if Dutch would leave him alone."

Sheriff Pat Owen was still in his office, his chair tilted back against the wall, his feet on the flat-topped desk. A double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun leaned against the wall beside his chair. He had a shot glass filled to the brim in his left hand. His right hand held a six-shooter. He shoved the hand gun back into its holster when he recognized Walker.

"Judge Gerald just dropped around, Neal." Owen's voice had a chuckle in it. "He's of the opinion there's goin' to be a big lynchin' before mornin'. That psalm-singin' teetotaler is in somethin' of a sweat. Kept feelin' of his skinny neck like he was feelin' a rope around it.

"Seems like Rucker died. Dutch won't settle for nothin' less than a hangin' verdict. Van Marshall, yonder, wants to be turned out, right now. He wants his guns and a fast horse and an hour's head start acrost the Border. You should hear Marshall tellin' it scarey to Gerald. The judge is kinda ketched in the broad middle of that somethin' we bin smellin' the stink of for a long time. Doggoned if you ain't got that Lin boy rigged out all right. All he needs now is a gun. You much of a shot with a pistol, son?"

"He never let me pack a gun." Lin was looking into the cell where Van Marshall stood. "But he'd give me a gun and a box of ca'tridges and have me target shoot at a tin can and when I missed a shot he's cut at my back with a quirt. I learned how to not miss, that-away."

Owen pulled at a drawer, took out a .38 Colt gun and a box of cartridges. He told Lin to shove the gun in under his shirt and empty the cartridges into his pockets.

"We're holdin' court in here," Sheriff Owen said, "directly Judge Gerald gits back. Some folks might call it a kangaroo court. Take your gun along, boy, and go into that empty cell. Close the door. It won't lock on you; lock's busted. Just set back away from the partition so's that old man of yourn can't git a-holt of you or the gun. And take 'er easy.

"Neal, you better fetch Dutch in. Here's his subpoena. Material witness. He's hollerin' for quick action so let's see to it he gits his big belly full. Unless you need my help, I'll ride shotgun herd on the pris'ners here." He chuckled. "Drink?"

"I'll fetch Dutch." Walker shook his head at the proffered bottle. Neal never drank whiskey.

The inspector had been gone only minutes when Judge Gerald came in. He was tall and lean. Fear showed in the eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles. There was the bulge of a gun under his black frock coat. An old leather-covered Bible was gripped in his hand. He laid it on the desk.

Lin's eyes cut a look at Van Marshall. Shave off Marshall's whiskers, trim his hair and put a black frock coat on him and Marshall and Judge Gerald would be brothers. Something clicked in Lin's memory.

"I'll never go to jail," the old man had made whiskey talk. "I got a twin. A mealy-mouthed psalm-shouter with snake blood in his veins. Gerald's gotta deal brother Van in on a big thing down on the Border because it's too big an' tough fer him to handle.

"Brother Gerald is the law that'll protect brother Van who will do the dirty work. That ol' daddy of ourn's turned over so much in his grave his sky-pilot circuit rider's bones is wore slick. What a hell of a pair of preacher's sons me'n my twin brother Gerald turned out to be. Us twins born a-hatin' one another's guts. But corner Van an' Gerald Marshall and, by the hell, we'll stand back to back an' cut 'em down as they come at us."

Lin saw Gerald sidling toward Marshall's cell.

"Look out, Sheriff!" Lin's voice was brittle. "He's got a gun! He'll slip it to the old man —or shoot you in the back!"

Owen's six-shooter was pointed at Gerald's belly. The judge backed away.

"Set down, Judge," Owen said. "Take the weight off your feet. Don't let that sneak-gun of yours go off half cocked. You got a sharp eye, son." Owen never turned his head to look at Lin. His eyes watched the judge.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bushwhack Brand

THE door opened and Dutch Rucker stumbled as he came in. He stumbled because Stock Inspector Neal Walker had kicked him hard. Dutch's gun holster was empty and blood trickled from his nose.

"I located him bushed up outside," Walker grinned. "He kinda sulked on me at the start." He shoved Dutch's gun into its empty holster and pushed him into a chair. "Take things easy, Dutch."

The husky inspector kicked the door shut. He walked over to Lin's cell door. There was a flat grin on his face. "The river's commencin' to rise. See anything that might have a stink?"

"Judge Gerald—and my old man," Lin yelped—"they're twin brothers! Their father was a circuit rider. They got too much hell's fire and brimstone crammed down 'em when they was kids. The judge got a tail holt on the Hayhook outfit. He was scared to turn loose and couldn't hang onto it alone. So he sent to Wyoming for his twin brother Van. I gotta spill this now, Neal. In case they kill me before I kin tell you what you're up against." Lin walked over to the steel barred partition.

"You think I'm squealin'. Mebbyso I am. But it ain't in no real law court. I wouldn't testify a word to send you to the pen. I'm no damned squealer. But Neal Walker is the whitest man on earth and the schoolmarm is a real lady. You know how you talked to her. And I was too damn' cowardly to say a word. I'm still scared of you. I always will be. You've quirted that fear of Van Marshall into me. You killed my father. You bushwhacked him. I heard you brag about it. You made me listen to how you shot Bob Lindsay. So you could marry his widow and git a-holt of his Wyoming cow outfit. Then your abuse killed my mother. And all you ever give me was rawhide quirtin'. I don't owe you anything but I wouldn't squeal on you in a law court. I made up my mind to that. But this ain't a law court. That judge sittin' there is your twin brother Gerald Marshall. There's plenty snake tracks along his back trail."

Van Marshall's eyes glittered in the lamplight. His tobacco-stained teeth bared in a wolfish grin. He let go the bars of the cell door and turned toward the partition.

"You're doin' a job of it, you snivelin' brat. Keep it up. Squeal your guts dry. Tell the pot-bellied Mexican-lovin' sheriff and his two-bit slow motion stock inspector the rest of it. Don't forget to tell that big overgrown son of Hayhook Herman's what kind of a man his daddy was."

"I'm comin' to that." Lin stood there in his new boots and hat and new clothes. He'd be clean when they shot him. He turned to face Dutch now.

"Hayhook Herman Rucker was buyin' all the stolen Mexican cattle Van Marshall could shove across the Border when the moon was right. He had this Gerald to protect him, so the law couldn't lay a hand on Hayhook Herman Rucker.

"Hayhook Rucker and Van Marshall got into an argument about the payoff on the last bunch of Mexican cattle the old man delivered. I helped handle them cattle. I was there when the argument turned into a ruckus. They pulled their guns. Van was faster. He shot Rucker. I got scared and high-tailed it. It wasn't murder. I'd be lyin' if I said so now or on the witness stand. That's all I got to tell."

"That ain't the way my pop had me write it down!" Dutch was on his feet. "He said Van bushwhacked him. He had a lot of money on him to buy cattle he was takin' delivery on. Marshall and his kid Lin stopped him. Van shot him and robbed him. That's what he had me write down. That's what he signed and marked with the Hayhook brand. Then he died—"

"That's what he had you write down." The door had opened quietly. Hilda stood there. She had on a white dress and a nurse's white cap. Her voice was low pitched, vibrant.

"That's what he told you to write down," she said. "And he signed his name Herman Rucker to it and marked his Hayhook brand down. But he told you plenty more that you weren't to write down. And a lot of it was what you already knew because you've helped your father brand cattle that were stolen out of Mexico. You've been at it since you were old enough to make a hand. And when Bud hung back, you bullied him into helping you. You came here to kill Walker, because Neal trailed you and watched you and your father brand stolen cattle while Bud tended the branding fire."

"Shut your mouth, Hilda!" Dutch's face was livid. "You're stuck on Walker. Hell, he wouldn't look at a fat heifer like you! He's got that sorrel maned schoolmarm—"

Walker's back-handed slap sent Dutch backwards into his chair.

Lin was off guard when Van Marshall's long arm snaked through the bars and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. His other hand jerked the .38 Colt from Lin's waistband.

DUTCH was sober enough now to see Marshall grab the gun. Walker had his back to the cells and hadn't seen. Sheriff Owen was looking past Hilda out into the night's shadows. Dutch crouched in the heavy barroom armchair where the stock inspector had thrown him. Blood trickled from his bruised mouth. He looked past Walker, who stood over him with both fists clenched, at Lin, who had jerked free of his old man's grip too late.

"Anybody kin be slow." Dutch stared into Lin's cell, but his grin was meant for the inspector.

Walker tensed. As he turned, unclenching his right fist to pull his gun, Van Marshall's voice cracked like a blacksnake bullwhip.

"Hands up!"

Walker stared into the muzzle of the .38. He read murder in Marshall's yellow eyes. He lifted both hands.

"Git 'im, Gerald!"

Judge Gerald, alias Gerald Marshall, moved fast. His sneak-gun, a sawed-off .45 six-shooter, was in his hand. Its short barrel came down on Owen's gray head. The sheriff tipped over the chair and his limp body struck the floor. His six-shooter fell to the floor beside him. The armchair lay on its side by the flat-topped desk.

"Stand against the wall, Walker!" Marshall snarled. "Face it. Drop a hand and I'll bust your spine with a bullet. Set quiet, Dutch, till I git to you. If he makes a wrong move, Gerald, cave his skull in. You stand where you are, Hilda. Don't move from where you're blockin' the doorway. Leave the door open. We're goin' out directly. I'm takin' you along. You're kinda hefty, but young and shore purty."

The judge snarled. "You're locoed drunk, Van. We gotta travel fast, you fool."

"She won't slow us down much. And I ain't nobody's fool. Them Hayhook cowhands that'll take in after us won't fire a shot close if they know we got Hilda. Drunk, eh? A little of my likker would do you good, Brother Gerald. You long-faced, mealy-mouthed—"

Lin was sweating. His guts crawled. He'd messed it up. Owen looked dead. Walker stood facing the wall, his hands up. Van and Gerald Marshall would have to kill Walker. Lin's stupidity had thrown the deal to Marshall. Lin felt sick with self-contempt and desperation.

Van Marshall's snarl came through the steel bars. "Your cell lock's busted, whelp. Walk out there. Don't move too fast. The sheriff packs the jail keys in his flank pocket. Git them keys. And unlock my door. Move slow enough so's Gerald kin watch what you do. I doubt if you got the guts to make a play. But if you do, Gerald will knock you in the head. You got your jackknife?"

"Yeah."

"Git it out. Open the big blade." Van's yellow eyes glittered. "Before you git them jail keys, walk up behind Dutch where he's a-settin'. Grab him by the hair from behind. Then pull that Barlow blade acrost his throat. Slit him from ear to ear. It's the only way I know to keep him from blabberin'—"

Lin had the blade open. He swung back the cell door. The kid moved slowly, cutting furtive looks at Walker. Neal had turned his head and was watching Lin. The inspector grinned. It was as though he was trying to give Lin courage. Like he was trying to relay a message.

Dutch Rucker stared at Lin's door as it opened slowly. He saw the knife and let out a moan. His body slid out of the armchair. He was on his knees, eyes glassy.

"Don't! Don't! Don't let him, Van! He hates my guts! He'll cut my throat like he'd stick a beef! I got the Hayhook now, Van. It's all mine. Them Hayhook cowhands will take my orders if I tell 'em not to trail yuh! Listen, Van! I'll sign it over to you. The big Hayhook. Lock, stock and barrel. I'll sign it in black and white. We'll go on like always. Judge Gerald kin protect us from the law.

"Lemme kill that stock inspector. I'll kill that Lin kid, if you say so. The sheriff's dead. With Walker and this Lin kid dead. there'll be nobody to squeal on us. Me'n you an' the judge will stick together. I don't hold no grudge against you for killin' Herman. All he ever done was work me harder'n he dared work any man in his outfit. I'm glad he's dead. I got the Hayhook. I'll sign it over to you, Van. You'n the judge kin own it. I'll work for wages. We'll hush this up. Nobody'll know—"

"There's your sister Hilda." Marshall's yellow eyes glittered.

"You kin have her!" Dutch's face was the color of putty.

Hilda Rucker smiled at her brother. It wasn't a pleasant smile. Her eyes were as cold as ice. She stood in the doorway in her nurse's white uniform, her yellow hair braided and coiled under her white cap.

"Put away your knife," Marshall told Lin. "You, Dutch, git up off the floor. Wipe off that damn' slobber. There's pen and ink. You'll put it in writin'. Walker kin sign fer a witness before you gut-shoot 'im. It'll be a pleasure to watch you kill Bob Lindsay's brat. He's got too big fer his little britches. Got hisself a new hat and a pair of boots. Throwed in with the law. It'll be a pleasure to watch Dutch kill the Lin brat. Won't it, Gerald?"

"Sign over that Hayhook first." The judge's pale eyes were almost lemon yellow behind the lenses of his steel-rimmed spectacles.

"You're the judge here at Manzanita, Gerald," Marshall grinned through the cell bars. "When they're big enough, they're old enough to marry. You kin splice me'n Hilda. There's a law somewhere says a wife can't testify ag'in' her husband in a law court."

"Dip a pen in that inkwell, Dutch," Gerald's voice had a metallic sound. "Write what I tell you. It's a legal bill-of-sale that transfers the Hayhook to me and Van Marshall."

"Now take them keys off Owen, you damned whelp. I'm commencin' to git itchy, locked up."

Lin moved slowly. He had to pass close behind Neal Walker.

"Your pardner's outside . . . come to swipe the keys . . ." Walker's voice was barely audible.

Lin's heart jumped. He cut a look through the doorway where Hilda stood and saw a shadow move. It was a split second glimpse and if they took notice of it they thought Lin was looking at Hilda. Hilda gave him a faint smile.

Fumbling now meant death. Lin walked to where Owen lay. He bent down, his hand reached into the sheriff's hip pocket and closed over the keys. As he pulled the keys out he saw Owen's right eye open. Then the eyelid dropped. Owen wasn't dead, he was playing possum.

Lin straightened. Dutch Rucker was close. He was straightened with the pen in his hand. Dutch's frame shielded Lin from the judge, who stood on the other side of the desk.

"Shake the lead outa them new boots." Marshall's voice rasped. "Unlock this door."

Lin gripped the keys. Dutch was watching him. Van Marshall's voice was like a rawhide quirt across Lin's back. He bunched the ring of keys and threw it at the doorway. Hilda stepped aside and the keys arched through the doorway. It had been a swift, sure, underhanded throw.

There was no sound of the keys hitting the ground.

"Got 'em!" Mona Owen shrilled. They heard her running into the night.

CHAPTER SIX

Blood and Death

THINGS happened now. Lin dove headlong at Dutch, butted him in the belly and they both crashed into the flat-topped desk. The lamp overturned, its flickering light guttered. The sawed-off .45 Colt six-shooter in Judge Gerald Marshall's hand went off. Through its crashing explosion sounded Dutch Rucker's scream. The .45 slug meant for Lin had broken Dutch's back.

The jail front door slammed shut as Hilda was yanked backwards. From out of the night sounded Mamie Flynn's voice. "Bud, you get back, there with your mother. You all right, Hilda?"

But the men inside the jail did not hear her. Gerald Marshall made a break for the door as the lamp crashed onto the floor and went out. Sheriff Pat Owen grabbed his six-shooter off the floor. He heaved onto his feet, his back barred the closed door and the gun in his hand exploded as Gerald charged and blundered into the man he thought he had killed. The judge screamed.

Van Marshall fought the steel bars of his cell with the fury of a caged lobo.

"Hug the floor, pardner!" Neal Walker shouted through the gunfire. "Get down and hug the floor!"

The judge was calling on God to save him. Pat Owen's six-shooter roared and the judge's screaming stopped.

Lin had crawled over to the wall where he remembered seeing the sheriff's sawed-off shotgun. He found it and crawled with it toward the cells. Before he got there he heard the metallic clang of the steel door in the adobe wall that separated the office from the cells beyond.

Lin knew what had happened just as surely as if it had been bright lamp light instead of thick black darkness choked with the acrid fumes of gunpowder. Neal Walker had gone in there and slammed the door behind him. He had gone in to kill Van Marshall—or be killed.

Lin threw himself against the locked door. Somewhere outside the jail little Mona Owen had the only key that would unlock it. Lin did not know he was sobbing and shouting until the whiskey voice of Sheriff Owen sounded behind him.

"You're wastin' your wind, son. Better tuck in your new shirt-tail an' take things easy. Let Neal handle it. You hurt anywheres?"

"No, sir."

Owen was pulling out a drawer in his desk. He found a candle, lit it, set it in a pool of its dripping tallow and held it a moment while the cooling tallow glued the candle base to the desk. Then he took out a quart bottle, pulled the cork and drank.

"There's a key lodged somewheres at the back of this drawer," Owen said. "See kin you reach it, son." He was reloading his six-shooter.

Owen put his overturned armchair on its legs and sat down with his bottle. His face was mottled and his shirt sodden with blood. He gulped down the raw whiskey. His iron gray hair was matted with blood. He looked like a dying man.

Lin yanked the drawer out. Odds and ends that had cluttered its inside spilled on the floor. Lin grabbed a long shanked key, and ran back to the steel door. He fumbled away precious seconds getting the key into the keyhole. He had to lay down the shotgun and use both hands to swing open the heavy door. From behind it came the muffled sound of two exploding guns.

Lin gripped the sawed-off shotgun and went in. Gun flame stabbed the darkness of Van Marshall's cell. Lin was thrown sideways as a slug smashed his left shoulder. He went down on his belly and shoved his shotgun

barrels through the bars of Marshall's cell. Waves of faintness swept him as he thumbed back both hammers. He gritted his teeth. He heard Marshall cough. He pointed the gun at that sound—pulled the triggers. The recoil kicked the gun back over his shoulder. The last Lin remembered was a roar. . . .

THE white sheets felt cool. The hand stroking his forehead was cool. Hilda Rucker, in her nurse's white uniform, was cool, and her eyes were very blue, and she smiled and told Lin not to fight his head like a bronc.

"It's all right now, Lin. Marshall can't ever hurt you any more."

"Another nightmare, Hilda?" The man's voice had a soothing sound.

"I think he's come out of it, Doctor. You can let Mona in. She keeps coming in through the window, anyhow. All night long. Lin was delirious and he'd holler for the jail keys and she'd slide in through the window, for all the world like a ghost, the jail keys clinking. Scared the daylights out of me. That's why I screeched and passed out, like a ninny."

Hilda was smiling. Smudges like bruises were under her blue eyes. The doctor in the white coat wasn't Old Doc. He was the young doc who had come a few months ago to take over Old Doc's practice. His arm was around Hilda's shoulders. He tilted her head back and kissed her. Hilda returned the kiss. He told Hilda they'd get married as soon after the funeral as possible.

Lin closed his eyes. He was glad for Hilda. He let one eye open and saw Mona Owen slide in through the open window as Hilda and the young Doc, his arm about her, walked toward the door.

"Lin!" The jail keys were shoved into his hand. Mona's eyes were bright. Lin looked into them and forced a grin.

"You're all right, Mona."

She let out a funny little choked cry and tears welled in her eyes and she kissed him clumsily. Her tears splashed on his nose.

"I don't care! If Miss Mamie can help Neal Walker fight for his life like that, I guess nobody, not even that Hilda, can stop me. I guess you're mine. You crossed your heart on it. You wouldn't back out, would you, Lin?"

"No. We made a deal. It's for keeps. We're kids now. But we'll stick to our deal. When we grow up we'll get married. Neal—?"

"Neal Walker's shot up bad," Mona said slowly. "But he'll be ridin' a horse in a month. Neal says you got more guts than most men. He says you saved his life. His gun was empty, in that other cell, and Van Marshall had one cartridge left, and he was goin' to kill Neal. Then you got the door open and the candle light showed you up and Marshall fired his last cartridge at you. Then you let go with both barrels."

"Did I kill the old man?"

"There's some buckshot in his hide, all right. Along with four of Walker's bullets. I guess he was dyin' fast when you cut loose. You surely peppered the cell wall with buckshot. I'll show you when you get well. You'll be up soon. Van Marshall's bullet didn't bust a bone. But you can't use your left arm for a while."

"Sheriff Pat?" Lin dreaded to ask about Mona's father.

"Young Doc," little Mona grinned, "says no likker. Old Doc says you can't cut a quart-a-day man off from his crock. So I slipped a bottle under Sheriff Pat's pillow. They had to shave part of his hair off to hemstitch his scalp. Pop's thick-skulled or he'd be dead. It's a fractured skull he's got. He says he don't remember things too clear. But he saw you go in after Van Marshall.

"Anyhow, when Mamie Flynn sent the Hayhook cowhands in, they found Sheriff Pat sittin' on the floor by the steel door with his six-shooter, and he was plumb out of his head. They thought he was shot in the belly but that was the judge's blood on Pop's shirt. He keeps gettin' outa bed. He went into Neal Walker's room in his nightshirt and pinned his sheriff's badge to Neal's nightshirt. Mamie Flynn was kinda weepy when she led Sheriff Pat back to his bed and Neal's eyes got watery. Neal and Miss Mamie are gettin' married."

"So's Hilda Rucker and the new Doc."

"Everybody but us," Mona said. "We're kids and gotta wait a while."

A face showed at the window, then a scrubbed face. Mona beckoned and Bud Rucker crawled in through the window. There was a paper bag in his fist. He shoved it at Lin.

"Horehound sticks. Peppermint for Mona. I'm sorry I knifed you, Lin. I didn't want to fight you. I was scared. But I was more scared of Dutch. He always bullied me. He taken after Hayhook Herman. Both big bullies. I didn't hardly bawl at their funeral today. Mom cried some. Her and Hilda. But they're wimmin. And they ain't grievin' too hard. Mom's sellin' the Hayhook to Sheriff Pat an' Neal Walker. Neal says you git a third int'rest, Lin. Mom's usin' the Hayhook money to buy the Hotel. I'll help her run it after school. I hate ranchin'. I'm scared of horses. I'm goin' to learn to run the Hotel.

"The kids from school all want to see you. After the funeral they gathered outside Sheriff Pat's house here. Miss Mamie had to go out and talk 'em into goin' on home. I guess you're the bravest kid ever hit Manzanita, all right. The Mexican kids got a song made up

already about you. And Mona says you're goin' to marry her. Miss Mamie says that's probably the way it'll be if Mona Owen says so, only you got to wait a while. Ain't you eatin' any horehound, Lin?"

LIN had only one hand he could use and Mona had a tight grip on it. She reached into the brown paper bag, took a stick of horehound candy and shoved it into Lin's mouth. Then she helped herself to the biggest striped peppermint stick and gave Bud a horehound.

By now Lin knew he was in Sheriff Pat Owen's house. This was Mona's room.

Doc came in with Hilda and Mona shoved Bud under the bed and tried to hide the bag of candy but the thing broke and the candy spilled.

"Peppermint, Hilda? I guess Doc wants horehound. It's more for men."

Mamie Fynn was propping the door open. Across the hall two other doors were wide open. Lin saw Sheriff Pat propped up against big white pillows. He was playing two-handed pitch with Old Doc. A bottle, two shot glasses and a pitcher of water were on the table beside the bed. Sheriff Pat had a grin on his face and his eyes were puckered. He called out to Lin in his whiskey voice.

"Hang onto them jail keys, son. You're a deputy sheriff now. Pin that badge on his nightshirt, Mona. Pat Owen breaks his deputies in young. Ain't that right, Neal?"

"That's how you caught me, Sheriff Pat." Neal looked a little white and drawn and he needed a shave. But his eyes were clear. He lifted a bandaged arm in a sort of salute.

"How you makin' it, pardner?" he drawled.

Mona took the horehound stick out of Lin's mouth and hauled Bud Rucker out from under the bed. Then she pinned a deputy badge on Lin's nightshirt.

"I'm makin' out fine, Neal." Lin's face was flushed.

Hilda stood on the other side of his bed and took his pulse. Mona kept a tight grip on Lin's hand. The young doc grinned. He had a cowlick and freckles and a homely sort of face but there was something about his brown eyes that made you like him on sight. His surgeon's hands had saved Neal Walker's life. He'd taken three big slugs out of the stock inspector's tough hide. He had money, was going to build his own hospital at Manzanita. Hilda was going to be head nurse when she got her graduate nurse's cap. She would be Mrs. Doc Brown by then. . . .

Mamie Flynn came over to Lin's bed, took Lin's head in both her hands and leaned over and kissed him hard.

"That," she said huskily, "don't make you any teacher's pet, Lin. That's for saving that man of mine."

Bud Rucker's mother came in and got him. She looked handsome in her black dress. She smoothed Lin's hair back and smiled down at him. She said she hoped her son Bud and Lin would always be good friends. Lin said they sure would and he shook hands solemnly with Bud. Then the Widow Rucker led Bud out.

Doc and Hilda followed Mamie Flynn out. Hilda closed the door.

Mona sat beside Lin's bed and held his hand and Lin's eyes closed and he was asleep. And Mona, in her best dress, dozed in her chair, and in a little while her head rested on the pillow alongside Lin's.

Nightmares no longer haunted Lin's sleep. The fear of his old man was gone. He would never again be afraid of anybody, anything. A faint grin twitched the corners of his mouth. Mona Owen smiled in her sleep, too. On the bed lay a broken brown paper bag with horehound and peppermint stick candy—and the keys to the Manzanita jail. The nickle-plated deputy sheriff badge pinned to Lin's white nightshirt gleamed in the last slanted rays of the sun that filtered through the open window. . . .

THE END

Insure Your Country's Future

BUY

U. S. SAVINGS BONDS!

Chape Gillie lifted his rifle but the girl pushed it down.

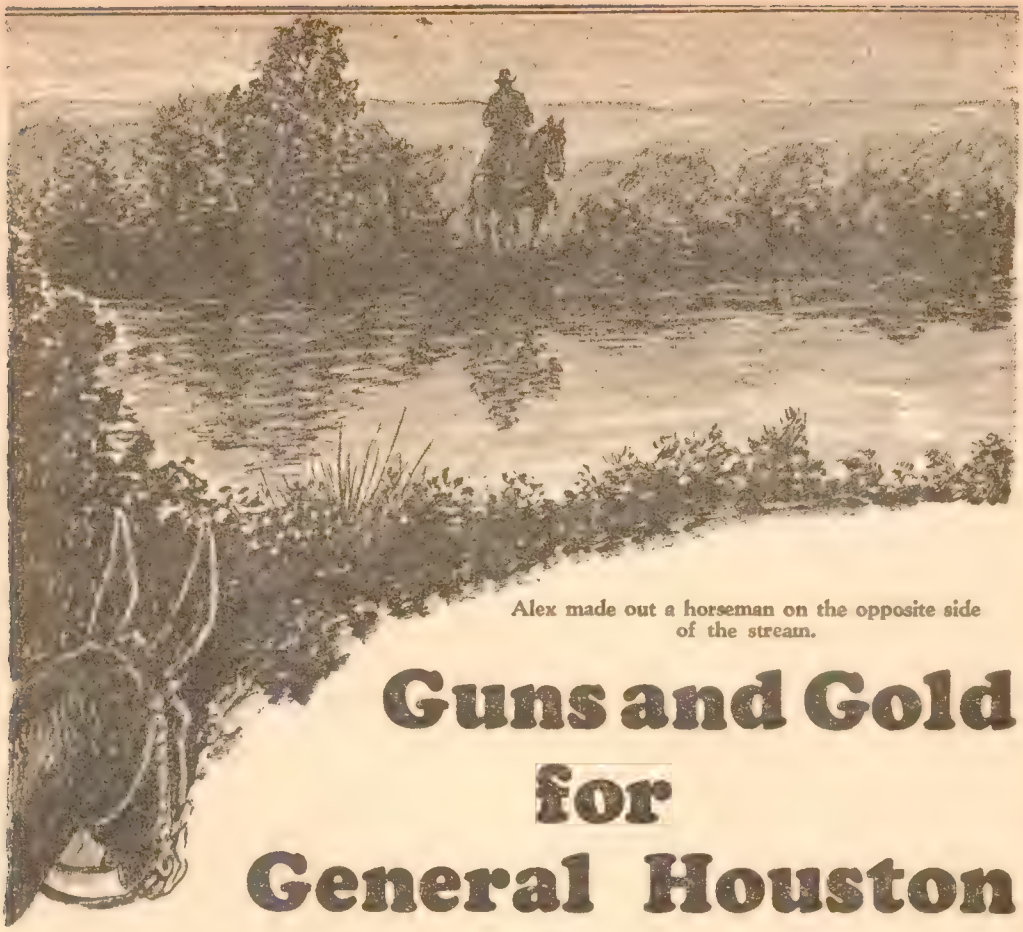
Alex Whipple, drillmaster of Texas Volunteers, moved out of Gonzales town, riding herd on half a ton of golden bullion that might save Sam Houston's retreating rag-tag army. Blocking Whipple's first trail was a Texas Judas who'd sell his native land for cash on the barrel head; on the second were the relentless, no-quarter patrols of the man whose name spelled murder to every Texan heart—dreaded Santa Anna!

CHAPTER ONE

"Santa Anna's Coming!"

GONZALES, that rude settlement in Teras where Samuel Houston had organized his army of liberation, stood in the path of war.

Widows were still weeping in the town, for confirmation had come that the Alamo had fallen at San Antonio de Bexar, seventy miles away. Santa Anna's veterans were marching eastward, and men and women of the Border were fleeing before him. The settlers were pouring into Gonzales, where Houston was to be their shield against the coming storm. They came in ox-drawn prairie wagons and on foot and saddleback, carrying such belongings as they had been able to gather in haste.



Alex made out a horseman on the opposite side of the stream.

Guns and Gold for General Houston

A Novel of a Texan's Fight for Freedom

By Cliff Farrell

The settlement, a score of log structures set down in haphazard fashion along the trail, was a wheel-churned mudhole at this sundown hour as the tide of refugees reached its crest.

Alex Whipple, drillmaster of Texas volunteers, and newly brevetted as captain, picked his way through the crowded street, careful to avoid soiling his fine top boots and his blue and buff uniform. The tailfeather of a cock pheasant swept dashingly back from the band of his wide-brimmed campaign hat.

This attire had cost him a pretty penny in New Orleans, but he considered the effect well worth the price.

Mindful of his responsibility as an officer and a gentleman, he maintained an outward air of boredom, as though such scenes of calamity were commonplace in his life. Occasionally his interest quickened at the sight of some feminine figure. If the object of his attention proved to be passably pretty, he bowed and saluted.

However, because of the cursed hustle and bustle, nothing came of these overtures, and he strolled on, careful to avoid spattering mud and creaking wheels.

In spite of his jaunty manner his spirits were at low ebb. Truth to tell, except for honor and pride, he would gladly have this day turned his back on the bright star of military glory and shaken the mud of Texas from his boots.

Glory? The word mocked him as he remembered the burning zeal with which he had come to Texas, fresh from military institute, to offer his untried sword on the altar of liberty. Where were the battle banners and the glamour? Where was the romance in

this sweating, mud-caked, swearing, homeless river of humanity?

Two months now as an officer in the army of liberation and he had yet to taste battlesmoke.

Army? Heaven spare the word! A rabble—mob—or all the textbooks and everything he had learned on the drillground were wrong. There was hardly a decent uniform to a regiment. Even Houston wore a Cherokee blanket coat and a beaded vest.

The ranks were filled with unruly frontiermen in buckskins who drank and quarreled and scorned discipline and came and went as they pleased. Dissension and insubordination, everywhere—even against Houston's commands. Men were deserting by the score now to join their families.

Alex had done what he could to help his general. Only that morning he had sent his compliments to the entire staff of a particularly rebellious regiment, from the colonel down to the last subordinate, asking them their pleasure.

But Houston had got wind of it and had issued an order against further duels. "Any officer who wastes valuable powder and lead in mere personal affairs will be given a firing squad and buried with all honors of war," Houston had said.

It was rather thankless on the part of the commander, of course, and disappointing to a man of red blood, but nevertheless it was an order.

ALEX'S step quickened as he discerned another person who was undeniably of the opposite sex. She had stepped from the door of a log house a few rods ahead. She paused on a tiny strip of solid earth, her progress blocked by the morass of mud and the toiling vehicles in the street.

It seemed obvious she wanted to cross the street. Rising on tiptoe she gazed impatiently around. She drew her skirts back as a carreta, which was what they called the primitive two-wheeled vehicles in these parts, shed gouts of yellow mud at her feet from its solid wheels.

Alex reached her side then. Her face was comely—far more so than he had dared hope. In fact she was an uncommonly attractive baggage.

She wore a simple dress of flowered calico, but in contrast to the average hit or miss method of fitting that seemed to be customary in this region, on her it had a certain style. That, no doubt, was due to the straight-legged way she carried herself. She was just tall enough to be graceful.

Her eyes were clear hazel, set above full cheekbones. She had her underlip caught in her teeth in vexation. Her hair, wheat-gold in shade, lay in two thick coils above her ears.

Her skin was tanned a soft golden shade too. A golden girl, Alex thought approvingly.

"Allow me," Alex said.

Without further ado he bent from his uniformed height, picked her up lightly to carry her through the mud. Under the conditions such service was accepted as common courtesy.

Evidently the hazel-eyed girl was unacquainted with local custom. She was so taken by surprise, that for a moment all she did was stare at him from a distance of a few inches. She had very nice eyes. Then she gave an indignant gasp and started to struggle. She was lithe and amazingly strong.

Alex had taken a stride or two into the mud. "In heaven's name," he gasped. "Be calm, dear lady."

She had nearly upset them both. Seeing the danger, she quieted. Alex managed to regain his footing, though he had come within a shade of toppling beneath the hoofs of an ox team.

She became as rigid as a stick in his grasp as he waded, almost to the top of his boots, through the muck. Reaching firm footing on the opposite fringe of the morass he sat her on her feet.

"Let me present myself," he said, bowing. "Alexander Whipple, at your service. Brevet captain of volunteers, formerly of the Louisville Blues, and now a soldier under General Houston."

She looked him over from head to foot, taking in the glove-fitting uniform, the pheasant feather, and the wisp of dark mustache on his upper lip. She glared into his dark eyes, and acted like she wanted to pull his black hair.

Temper had rushed up into her face in a pink tide. "And now," she said grimly, "how am I supposed to get back where I want to be? Do I wade or swim?"

Alex floundered. "I took it for granted—"

"You take too much for granted," she fumed. "You and your pretty uniform. I had no desire to cross that mudhole. I merely stepped outside to look for a friend."

Pretty uniform! Alex could have forgiven almost anything but that affront. A thankless attitude, indeed, for his courtesy.

"A mistake that is easily remedied, miss," he said stiffly, for he had made sure she wore no wedding ring.

Before she could evade him he picked her up again. With long, angry strides he carried her back through the mud, and set her down peremptorily before her door.

He bowed again, very formally. That gesture of respect was another mistake, for it brought his face within closer reach of her hand.

She slapped him, taking instant advantage of her opportunity. It was no mere ladylike rebuff. She had her tongue between her teeth

and she swung with vigor. It stung. It made Alex blink. And it attracted attention. The tide of vehicles halted. Muddy men and shawled women were staring.

The girl started to flounce toward the door of the house from which she had originally appeared, and Alex started to turn away.

But a stalwart young man came striding among the halted wagons. "Just a minute, you with the feather!"

The girl moved hastily and intercepted the intruder's arm as he reached the dry footing. "Oh, for pity's sake!" she exclaimed. "Don't make a scene, Tom. The matter is ended."

"You don't usually go around slapping men unless there's good reason, Stacey," the Tom person said, eyeing Alex with disfavor. "What happened?"

The fellow seemed to be about Alex's own height and age. He wore an elkskin hunting shirt, caught at the waist by a sash in the Mexican style. Below that were wide-bottomed pantaloons, slashed up the side and laced with buckskin thongs. Spurs sprouted from his boots. This bizarre mixture of Spanish and Yankee attire was not unusual in this outlandish region.

THE fellow's garb showed signs of hard usage. He had a wide-brimmed hat slung on his back by the chin string. His shock of dark red hair could have stood the attention of a barber. He had bold, lean features, deeply sunburned. All in all he made a rather surprising figure. But in spite of his appearance, his speech was not the jargon of a frontiersman. The fellow actually seemed to have some of the refinements of a gentleman.

"Nothing happened," the girl said anxiously. "It was all a mistake."

"If this fancy pants insulted you," the red-headed one vowed. "I'll call him out."

Alex same instantly to attention. "At your service, sir," he sad coldly.

"Oh, dear!" the girl wailed. "Don't be a fool, Tom Fitzhugh. Come into the house, you hothead. This is no time to—to risk everything over trivial matters."

A crowd had gathered, drawn by the scent of trouble. Tom Fitzhugh hesitated. Evidently the girl's words had given him pause for thought. He started to turn away.

The bystanders stirred in disappointment, for the affair seemed to be passing over without bloodshed. Alex was not displeased. Tom Fitzhugh probably was a kinsman of the girl. He might even be her brother. She was impetuous to a fault, of course, but even that trait might be forgiven. She could, no doubt, be very fascinating, too, on acquaintance. But putting a bullet in one of her kinsmen was hardly likely to restore him to her good graces.

More to the point was Houston's ban on dueling, and the promise of a firing squad to anyone who wasted powder in such matters.

The affair would have ended there, except for the intervention of a man who pushed through the bystanders and halted Tom Fitzhugh.

"If you'll pardon the suggestion, Fitzhugh," the newcomer said, sweeping off his beaver hat. "As an old friend of Miss Tallifer's father, I'm afraid that, in the goodness of her heart, Miss Tallifer is being too quick to excuse Whipple's actions."

Tom Fitzhugh halted. He eyed the newcomer with a faint frown. "Oh, hello, Cuyler," he said. "Did you see the affair?"

"I did. Whipple owes Miss Tallifer an apology, at the very least. I understand your position, of course. A man about to be married has responsibilities that rise above other matters. I don't blame you. Therefore I ask your permission to act for you in this matter."

Alex drew a sigh of resignation. The fat was in the fire now, no question. If he was any judge of character, Tom Fitzhugh would react to that mendacious offer as though he had been jabbed with a goad. The implication was plain that Fitzhugh was hiding back of a petticoat.

CHAPTER TWO

A Matter of Honor

THE interloper was known as Jared Cuyler. Alex had met him casually across a poker table a few days previously. Cuyler was one of the many rather vague persons who operated on the fringe of the army, seeking to pick up a profit by speculating on the misfortunes of others.

It was said he was under an assumed name. He was believed to be a G. T. T. That meant Gone to Texas, and was a term applied to many individuals in this region who were vague about their past but ambitious in regard to their future. Texas was a refuge for many men who had left the States, and, in fact, G. T. T. was not always used as a term of opprobrium.

Cuyler had been a trader across the Rio Grande before the revolution broke out. No doubt he had done some smuggling also, for that was always a profitable sideline for an opportunist in Border trading.

Because of his knowledge of the country and the language it was popularly believed that he was now acting as a spy for Houston. Alex happened to know that Houston distrusted the man and suspected him of being a Tory.

Cuyler always dressed well. He was in his forties, thin-waisted, with a long jaw and a thin straight nose above a flat upper lip. His sideburns were tinged with gray. He wore a

kneelength coat in the plantation style, and carried an ivory-handled sword cane.

Tom Fitzhugh had gone white along the line of his jawbone at Cuyler's aspersion. Then he went turkey red. "I can handle my own affairs, I assure you, Cuyler," he explained.

Fitzhugh then glared at Alex. "I'm waiting for your apology to Miss Tallifer, sir," he snapped.

"No offense was intended or given," Alex said stiffly. "I might add that most young ladies would have thanked me for assisting them through the mud. If any apology is due I'm not the one to offer it."

"So!" Fitzhugh was steaming now. "You want Stacey—er, Miss Tallifer, to apologize to you? I believe we understand each other. You have a friend, I presume?"

"Of course," Alex nodded.

"No! No! No!" the girl protested frantically. "Tom, you can't! You can't fight a duel now of all times. You've got no right to risk everything by—"

Fitzhugh took her arm and led her toward the door of the nearby log house. He said over his shoulder, "Please make the arrangements for me, Cuyler, if you will,"

Alex caught a glimpse inside the house as the door stood open a moment to admit them. Another feminine figure was bending over a pallet on which he saw the massive, shaggy head of a gray-haired man who evidently was very ill. Then the door closed.

Alex bowed to Jared Cuyler. "I am quartered down the street with Lieutenant Lawrence Shields," he said. "Lieutenant Shields will act for me. Where will he find you?"

"At Jose Renero's monte house across the way," Cuyler said.

Sundown had faded. The swift dusk of these latitudes was moving in as Alex picked his way along the muddy footpath toward the log house that he and his friend had taken over as lodgings only that morning when the previous occupants had decided to flee eastward for safety.

So her name was Stacey Tallifer, and Tom Fitzhugh was going to marry her soon. Well, at least he wasn't her brother. But that was little consolation.

"Blast the luck," Alex groaned.

If the ubiquitous Jared Cuyler hadn't put in his oar the thing would have been forgotten. It was a tempest in a teapot, anyway.

Even so Alex knew that he stood a good chance of being in his grave before another sundown. He had no desire to kill Tom Fitzhugh, or even blood him. After all, the fellow was pledged to wed. It was out of the question to think of presenting a promised bride with a crippled groom, or even a corpse. That bride, at least.

The trouble was that the redheaded man probably would not be as considerate. And Fitzhugh plainly was a man who knew guns and how to use them.

A devil of a mess. Alex had fought three duels in the past, but two of those affairs had been calf-like matters of offended honor among callow students in which nobody was hurt. The other engagement had been more mature and serious, but Alex had managed to only wing his opponent.

By cursed coincidence all the previous matters had been due to misunderstandings over the favor of young ladies. And now it had happened again.

If he burned powder he was being insubordinate, and Houston was capable of making an example of him. And if he didn't fire he'd likely be a dead man in the next instant.

He was wrapped in gloom as he entered the log house. It was a small structure on the fringe of the settlement, with only one door which opened into the street.

LIEUTENANT Larry Shields was just off duty, and had lighted a candle to repel the gloom. There were small windows, the shutters flung wide to admit air, and the east end of the room was taken up by a rock and mud fireplace. A pallet, split-board table and two benches completed the furnishings.

Alex peered. His fellow officer was busy at the pallet, repacking his personal effects. And they had only moved in that morning.

Larry looked up. He was a stocky Texan, normally easy-going. But there was bitterness and shame in his round face now.

"You moving out so soon, Larry?" Alex asked.

"Uh-huh. And you too, my friend. The bogey man is coming. Santa Anna. We're turning tail. We're falling back to the Colorado River. We're runnin' away."

"What?"

"It's a fact, Alex. Houston's ordered retreat. The army is marching before midnight. They're sinking the cannons in the river so they won't fall into Santa Anna's hands. Houston is abandoning all the country from here to the Rio Colorado without even making a fight. Before mornin' every settler between here an' the Brazos will be in flight toward the Sabine."

Retreat, when everybody had been looking forward to meeting the enemy. It was a blow, a bitter disappointment. Alex said, "It's the only thing Houston can rightly do. He can't fight Santa Anna—not yet. Twelve hundred untrained men against odds of four or five to one, and veterans, at that. And the twelve hundred an undisciplined rabble."

"There won't be twelve hundred left by midnight," Larry said grimly. "The men are deserting in droves. Some of the officers

are talking of deposing Houston, and beating for volunteers to march against Santa Anna."

"And that would be the final mistake," Alex shrugged. "Devil take it, but this is a fine kettle of fish. I can't march tonight. I'm obligated to settle another matter at dawn here in this mudhole."

Larry wheeled, eyeing him. "At dawn?"

"A fellow named Fitzhugh," Alex nodded. "Jared Cuyler will act for him. You know Cuyler. He's at Renero's monte house. Be a good fellow and stroll up there and make the arrangements. It's my choice, and it will be pistols, of course."

"Fine!" Larry said caustically. "That's just great. You know what Houston thinks about duels. And he had you directly in mind when he issued that general order. Not satisfied with challenging the entire staff of a regiment, you have to call out a stranger. Who's this Fitzhugh? I never heard of him."

"I only laid eyes on him a few minutes ago."

"What started it? It couldn't have been a woman this time. Why, I haven't seen one pretty enough in days to—"

"Her name is Stacey Tallifer," Alex glowered. "And she is attractive—very."

"Well, chop me up for hawg feed," Larry said enviously. "Depend on you to find a pretty gal if there's one in cannon shot. All right, son, give me the details."

CHAPTER THREE

Retreat!

ALEX briefly told the facts. Larry listened in wonder, then went out to find Jared Cuyler. Somewhere a woman began screaming in the town. Then another and another. The sound rose, shrill and eerie. Children began wailing. Men were shouting and some were cursing Houston's name. Everybody seemed to have gone suddenly into a frenzy.

The news the army was retreating instead of advancing had spread into Gonzales. The turmoil welled up. Terror mounted, wave on wave. Riders began dashing by shouting wild rumors that Santa Anna's advance guard was in sight.

The whirlwind was coming! Panic gripped men and women who had previously stood firm, trusting in their faith that nothing would ever reach them.

From a window Alex watched the wild rush to abandon Gonzales. Wagons and pack animals were being hurriedly piled with possessions. The column of refugees toiling eastward increased until the trail was a swollen torrent of humanity and cattle and vehicles, fleeing through the early darkness.

The great Runaway Scrape was on.

Alex hurried to the army camp. It was in disorder, and almost in rebellion. He reported to Houston in his tent. The general had a dog-eared copy of *Caesar's Commentaries* on his lap, and seemed oblivious of the recriminations that were being voiced in the camp by even many of his officers.

"Sir," Alex said, "I request permission to be absent from duty until after sun-up, at which time I will rejoin the command. I have a pressing personal matter that requires my absence until dawn."

"At dawn, eh?" Houston commented. "A personal matter. Well, you're at least aboveboard in disobeying my orders. Any man who does not march with his command tonight will be listed as a deserter. Good night, young man."

Alex walked grimly back to town. Larry had just reached the cabin, back from his conference with Jared Cuyler. "Because of the retreat," Larry said. "We can't wait until the usual time. We'll meet an hour from now. We agreed to hold the affair by torchlight if that is satisfactory to you."

"Dying by torchlight will be romantic, at least," Alex said wearily.

"I picked up a little information about your proud beauty," Larry said. "I mentioned the name of Tallifer to Jose Renero, the monte man. Tallifer? Si! Si! Everyone know Señor Amos Tallifer. He is one very, very reech man, I tell you, amigo. He own the gold mine in Old Mexico. For years he mine the gold. A very important man, señor. And he have one, two, very beautiful daughters. Muy bonito."

"A gold mine in Mexico, eh," Alex commented. "What are they doing here? I glimpsed a sick man in the house. And another girl. That's the other muy bonito, I presume."

"The sick man is Amos Tallifer. They arrived here at Gonzales before daybreak this morning, but they must have had bad luck on the way. They were on foot and had Amos Tallifer in a carreta, drawn by a skinny oxen. Your redheaded gamecock, Tom Fitzhugh, was with them. It seems that Fitzhugh has been a segundo—a sort of second in charge at the Tallifer mine, which is in the La Juana Mountains south of the Rio Grande."

"What's wrong with Amos Tallifer?" Alex asked

"Bullet wound."

Alex's brows went up. "How come?"

"Nobody seems to know. The Tallifers and Fitzhugh have been very close-mouthed since their arrival. They discouraged visitors—and questions. Amos Tallifer has been operating the gold mine for years under a concession from the Mexican government. But gringos aren't popular down there right now. It's my guess they had to light a chuck for Texas in

a hurry. They must have run into trouble along the way."

Larry had to hurry off to camp then to report to his command. "I'll be back," he promised.

ALEX stood alone in the cheerless room. It seemed a lost cause. Houston in retreat, the army falling apart, Santa Anna on his way with his veterans, fresh from their victory at Bexar. The whole country in flight, homes abandoned, land that had been claimed from the wilderness left deserted, growing crops waiting the trampling hoofs of the caballeria.

And for Alex, within the hour a duel in which he had no heart. He plucked the gay feather from his hat, looked at it wryly, then tossed it in the fireplace. One man's pride seemed a ludicrous thing now.

A hand tapped the door. He said, "Enter!"

A slender figure stepped quickly in, and closed the door. It was the girl, Stacey Tallifer.

She wore man's garb—baggy cotton pantaloons, a short canvas saddle jacket and a wide-brimmed, flat-crowned hat that was pulled well down over her face.

She stood against the door. She removed the hat and held it in her hands. "Please excuse the way I'm dressed, Captain," she said. "I didn't want to be recognized."

She was excited, but she kept her voice down as though she feared listening ears. The shimmer of a passing torch touched her hair. It was deep copper in that faint glow.

Alex offered a bench, eyeing her wonderingly, but she did not sit down. "I came to talk about this duel," she said hurriedly. "This is no time to be fighting among ourselves, you know."

"You may have a point there," Alex conceded.

She brightened. "Then—then you won't meet Mr. Fitzhugh?" she asked eagerly.

"Hold on! I didn't say that. After all, it wasn't my challenge."

"Oh, I know!" she said impatiently. "I know the rules."

"Look here, Miss Tallifer. Did you come here to ask me to refuse this meeting with Fitzhugh?"

"Yes."

"I can't do that," Alex shrugged.

"You men and your infernal code of honor," she burst out bitterly.

"Confound it, I can't make a blackleg out of myself. Your precious Mr. Fitzhugh is the only one who has the privilege of calling off the affair."

She came closer. She probably was going to turn on the tears now; the feminine method.

She must have guessed what he was thinking, for she flushed. "I'm not going to try to play on your heartstrings, Captain," she said bluntly. Her voice was so low that Alex had to bend close to her. "It's only that I don't want anyone to hear what I have to say. There's nothing personal in this favor I'm asking. Oh, I admit that Tom Fitzhugh is very dear to me and mine. If you killed him I would grieve. But it's bigger than that. I'm asking this for the sake of Texas."

"I see," Alex said politely.

"You don't see, of course. Look, Captain Whipple. If it was in your power to give General Houston the thing he needs above all, what would you offer him?"

"Loyalty," Alex said slowly.

"Oh, of course. But even loyal men can't fight empty-handed."

"Guns, then. Powder, shot, cannon!"

"Very good, Captain. How bright you are." She got her enjoyment for an instant out of Alex's frown. "And how do you get such things?"

"Come to the point," Alex demanded, nettled at being treated as a small boy.

She studied him a long time. "I'll tell you," she said suddenly, as though having decided a knotty problem. "My father has operated a gold mine in Old Mexico for some years. I have lived there with him, for the past two years. My sister also. Mother is dead. Father is a friend of Houston and loyal to the Texas cause. Six weeks ago we managed to evade government troops who came to arrest Dad and seize the mine. We escaped with a considerable amount of gold bullion. More than half a ton, in fact."

ALEX stared. She was so casual about it. Half a ton of gold. Just like that. A quarter of a million dollars.

"Mexican friends hid us for a time," she went on. "A fortnight ago we crossed the Rio Grande after dark, with the gold in an ox-drawn wagon. There were five of us—my sister Nan and myself, Dad, Tom Fitzhugh and Tomas Gomez, who had been with father at the mine for years. Tom Fitzhugh had been Dad's assistant at the mine.

"By that time the siege of the Alamo at Bexar had started. We traveled at night, staying concealed in daytime. We thought we had cleared the last obstacle, and then a week ago, we discovered we were being trailed."

"Santa Anna's patrols got wind of you, eh?" Alex said.

"No. Tomas discovered that three men were following us, but they were Americans. One was called Monk Hatch. Hatch had worked for Dad at the mine for a while, but he was a trouble-maker, and Dad had to discharge him.

"Monk Hatch evidently knew we had taken

bullion out of Mexico and had been looking for us. He had gathered up two other ruffians to help him."

She was telling it so bluntly, without dramatics, that Alex felt a trifle bewildered. "What happened?" he asked.

"We couldn't just pick up that much bullion and run from them," she said. "Dad at once decided to hide the stuff. Cache it, they call it down here. We did that, concealing it after dark along the way.

"We pushed on, and at daybreak Hatch ambushed us. Tomas was killed and Dad was wounded, but we stood them off until sunup, when they withdrew. We stayed there until dark, not daring to move. During the night we managed to slip away on foot. We carried Dad on a litter. We had a bad time for a few days until we got a carreta from a friendly Mexican. We arrived here in Gonzales this morning. Dad is recovering now, but won't be really on his feet for weeks.'

Alex eyed her skeptically, wondering whether to believe that story of buried treasure.

"You know the situation," she said. "Texas has no money, no credit. That bullion isn't much, compared to the real need, but it would be a windfall for Houston right now. It would encourage financial men in the States to offer assistance."

"Likely Monk Hatch has found the cache and lifted the loot," Alex shrugged.

"I doubt it. We had traveled ten miles before being attacked. That's a big country to search. Tom Fitzhugh was planning to start back tonight with pack mules and get the bullion. He has found a man he can trust to go with him. Two men would have a better chance of escaping discovery by Santa Anna's patrols than a large party."

She looked at him levelly. "Tom is the only man who knows the location of the cache," she said simply. "Dad is in no condition to travel."

"And so I'm supposed to play the blackleg for the sake of the cause," Alex said.

"You don't believe my story, do you, Captain?"

"After all," Alex said flatly. "People usually don't go out of their way to tell strangers where they've buried treasure."

"There are times," she said, "when you have to trust even a stranger. And anyway I haven't told you where the bullion is hidden. I've told you the exact truth."

By gad, Alex thought, he actually believed her. "See here," he snorted. "It seems to me that your precious Fitzhugh is the man who should cancel this duel, if it means so much to the cause."

"He's more pig-headed than even you," she exploded. "He's so afraid of his standing as a man of honor."

A pistol shot from somewhere in the town gave the girl a start. She collected herself and stood waiting.

"All right," Alex said. "I'll notify Mr. Fitzhugh that I prefer to defer our meeting until after his return. I trust he returns safely."

CHAPTER FOUR

Boothill Job

STACEY Tallifer was a little limp with relief. "I'm sorry I called you a pighead," she said shakily. She held out a hand. It was a very slim, warm hand. For the first time Alex was aware of a real antipathy toward this Tom Fitzhugh. The fellow had all the luck.

She put on the masculine hat, tucking her hair beneath it, preparatory to leaving.

Alex opened the door and looked out to see if the coast was clear. There seemed to be considerable excitement up the street. He motioned the girl to stand back while he tried to make out its cause.

"There must have been somebody shot," he said, remembering the pistol explosion a few minutes earlier.

A cluster of men were gathered up the street. Someone brought a pitch torch. The crowd parted to make way for two men who were carrying a limp form between them.

Alex could not identify anyone at that distance. Then he gave a start. The victim, who looked like he might be dead, was carried into the log house where the Tallifers were sheltered.

"What is it?" the girl whispered.

Alex hesitated. "Somebody seems to have been hurt," he said. "They took him into your place."

With a gasp, she pushed past him and rushed out. She had the presence of mind to leave the street, turning the corner to make her way through the back areas to the house where she had been staying.

Alex decided to follow her. He had not been armed during his sundown stroll, but now he opened his haversack, drew out his belt and holster, which held his ball pistol, and strapped it on.

He turned toward the door, but paused, listening to shouting in the street.

"Spread out!" a man was calling. "Surround the town. Some of you make tracks for Houston's camp. He may have gone there."

That was Jared Cuyler's voice. Then Cuyler yelled again. "There's a light in the cabin he's living in. This way, some of you."

Running boots splashed through the mud. Then the door was flung open. Jared Cuyler, an octagonal-muzzled pistol in his hand, burst

in. Other men crowded hard on at his heels.

"Here he is!" Cuyler exclaimed. He pointed the gun at Alex. "All right, Whipple. Better lift your arms."

"What in damnation?" Alex raged. "Have all of you gone crazy?"

"Take his pistol," Cuyler ordered. Men moved in and disarmed Alex.

"Wait a minute," someone objected. "Give him a chance to talk. Where's the feller who said he had seen Whipple shoot Tom Fitzhugh?"

A thickset, roughly-dressed man, with heavy cheekbones and wide lips, was pushed into the foreground. He looked at Alex from cunning eyes set deep in muscular folds of swarthy flesh.

"That's him," the man affirmed. "I happened to be standin' behind a wagon nearby when I heard the shot. I glimpsed someone in uniform backin' away between buildings. I got a purty good look at him before he ran out of sight."

"What's your name?" someone asked.

The thickset man started to answer, but Jared Cuyler spoke first "His name is Monk Hatch. I can vouch for him. Hatch is well-known around here."

Monk Hatch! Alex stared. He said, "You say Tom Fitzhugh was shot? And you think I shot him? You're mistaken. I was here in this cabin when I heard that pistol shot."

"You can prove that, of course?" Cuyler said sardonically.

Alex started to speak, then thought better of it. Any doubt he had entertained about Stacey Tellifer's story was stamped out.

MONK HATCH was the man who had led the attempt to get the Tallifer bullion. Now he had turned up in Gonzales. That could mean only that he was still after the bullion.

Cuyler said, "You can't think of an alibi on the spur of the moment, can you, Whipple? Afraid to face Fitzhugh in an honorable duel, you let your nerves get away with you to the point of assassinating him in the dark. Look, men! There's a pistol under the pallet."

Cuyler crossed the room as he spoke. He knelt, reaching an arm beneath the pallet in the corner He arose with a short-muzzled pistol in his hand. Alex had never seen the gun before.

"The gun still reeks with powder," Cuyler said. "Take a sniff. It was fired within the last few minutes."

Bystanders passed the gun from hand to hand. "Whipple must have tried to kick it out of sight under the bed when he heard us coming," Cuyler said. "A poor hiding place, but he was in a panic, as we all can imagine."

Alex could feel his heart hammering. It had all hit him so unexpectedly. First an eyewitness, and then this clinching evidence. He knew that Jared Cuyler must have faked the discovery of the gun. The man must have had the weapon in his sleeve when he stooped. He had merely pretended to produce it from beneath the pallet.

"I guess that clinches it," someone said. "Let's git this over I've got a family to think about, an' I don't want Santa Anna to ketch 'em."

It was all like a bad dream to Alex. Why, they were going to hang him. He saw it in their faces. Just like that. They seemed impersonal enough about it. That's what made it seem so unreal. They had tried and found him guilty in those few words—so they meant to get it over with so they could go back to their own affairs.

A word from Stacey Tallifer could clear him, of course—if he was given the chance to talk. But what reason could she give for being in his quarters alone at that time? She could hardly tell the whole world the story of the bullion.

They were moving in. A hand grasped his arm. Alex wrenched free. One of the rear open windows was back of him. He whirled, took one stride, and dove through the opening.

Someone's fingertips clawed at his boot, but missed effective grip. He managed to absorb some of the shock of his headlong crash to earth with his arms. He had always been lithe, active. He landed on his shoulders, but rolled to his feet.

He had the presence of mind to dart nearer the wall of the house. Cuyler's head and shoulders appeared at the opening, and he saw the glint of a pistol in the starlight.

He ran along the wall, and Cuyler was unable to get effective aim at that angle. The gun exploded, but it was a wasted shot.

Then Alex rounded the corner out of immediate range. He legged it desperately through waist high weeds into the darkness.

They were raging in pursuit now, but they had lost sight of him. A score of men began blundering among ash heaps and turkey runs and pig pens in the back areas, their numbers hindering rather than helping the pursuit.

Alex paused in shadows. He turned his uniform jacket inside out, for its brass buttons and buff facing made him a marked man. The jacket had a dark lining that was less conspicuous in the starlight.

The heat of the chase faded quickly, for these men had other worries. And Alex surmised that few of them had more than a hazy idea of what it was all about. Within a few minutes he knew that most of them were returning to their own affairs. The flight from Santa Anna was paramount in their minds.

But he knew Jared Cuyler and Monk Hatch likely would not quit so easily. And the girl had said that Hatch had two other men with him when they ambushed the empty gold wagon.

He waited in concealment alongside a dark structure that housed a blacksmith shop.

He wanted, at first chance, to get in touch with Stacey Tallifer and warn her that Monk Hatch was in Gonzales. And he wanted to tell her that Jared Cuyler was mixed up in this. Cuyler had worked hand in glove with Monk Hatch in trying to put the blame for the shooting on Alex.

Beyond the fringe of town the campfires of Houston's army were flickering in the darkness. A lonely drum was beating sadly there. Alex saw the steady flicker of shadows as a column of men crossed the outline of the campfires.

THE vanguard of the army was on the move. Houston had started his retreat. And the town, too, was now almost deserted. The peak of the hegira had passed through the settlement. Only stragglers were following the muddy trail now. The buildings stood dark and forlorn.

There still was activity around the house the Tallifers had been occupying. Alex moved nearer and saw that a carreta, with a gaunt ox in the shafts, had been brought to the door. The door was open, and a candle burned in the room. He saw Jared Cuyler's silhouette as he entered the house.

Evidently Tom Fitzhugh was not yet dead. In fact he must be very much alive. Alex detested the fellow more than ever, feeling a bitter resentment toward him because of this attention he was receiving.

They loaded in a few belongings, and the girls climbed into the vehicle. The wheels began creaking as the ox was prodded into motion. Like all the other refugees the Tallifers were fleeing before Santa Anna.

CHAPTER FIVE

Long, Long Trail. . . .

ALEX turned and moved away through the darkness. He left the town. A quarter of a mile or more beyond its limits he made his way to a hiding place in a patch of brush alongside the muddy highway. Presently he heard the cumbersome wheels of the carreta approaching. Cuyler rode by, his horse snuffling impatiently at being held to the plodding pace of the ox.

The carreta appeared, and as it passed abreast, Alex moved out into the trail, coming up to the rear of the cumbersome vehicle. He could see two feminine forms in the darkness.

"Miss Tallifer," he murmured. "Miss Stacey."

Stacey Tallifer slid from the vehicle to the muddy road beside him. She grasped his arm and drew him off the road. He started to speak, but she made a gesture for silence.

She waited until the carreta was at a safer distance. "Thank the good, merciful heavens," she breathed incoherently. "I prayed. I was beginning to think you were never—"

"You prayed?" Alex questioned eagerly. "Tell me about it."

"There's no time for that now," she said. She was tugging at his arm, pulling him along. "Hurry! We've got to get away from here before Cuyler misses me."

"Where are you going?"

"To get the bullion."

"What? See here, I thought Fitzhugh and your father were the only men who knew where it was hidden."

"The only men, yes. But I know. I helped them cache it. Please hurry!"

Reluctantly Alex followed as she led the way at a half-run through brush and darkness. He had to hustle to keep in touch with her. He collided with trees in the darkness Twice he fell headlong over stumps. Thorns snagged his uniform. Mosquitoes settled on his neck. The night was warm, and he began to perspire. He was puzzled and fuming.

He overtook her. She now had on the masculine garb in which she had come to his quarters. Evidently she had been wearing it under the dress, and in the darkness she had discarded the dress for the sake of more freedom of movement.

"How about Fitzhugh?" he demanded. "He's alive, evidently, from all the kissing I saw going on awhile ago."

"He's alive. The ball tore through his side. It is a nasty wound, but it seemed to have missed any real vital spots. He lost a lot of blood. The shock was the worst, though he's coming out of it now. Nan will look after him. Nan is my sister. It was beastly to have to hit the trial with him and Dad but we couldn't stay at Gonzales. Santa Anna is flying the red flag. No quarter to rebels."

"Monk Hatch showed up in Gonzales tonight," Alex said. "He and your friend, Jared Cuyler, seem to be in cahoots. They tried to get me hung on a trumped-up charge of shooting your redheaded champion."

"I know," she said as they hurried along. "I heard the whole thing. I came back to your quarters when I realized what was going on. I was in the crowd outside the door, listening. I was starting to push through in order to expose them when you made that reckless dive through a window. You might have been shot."

"Apparently," Alex snorted, "the chances of

my being shot are still very bright if I continue associating with you. If you know Cuyler is linked up with Hatch, why are you letting him travel with you."

"Cuyler isn't aware that we know Hatch is the one who ambushed us. That fight was in the brush and at dawn. We wouldn't have known Hatch was in on it either if old Tomas Gomez hadn't happened to have sighted him at a distance the day previous. And Cuyler doesn't dream that I was talking to you when Tom was shot. Cuyler hopes I believe you are guilty also. So I let him pretend to be our friend until I got a chance to slip away from him. He traveled with us because he wanted to keep an eye on all of us."

"It's very plain who shot your sweetheart," Alex said.

"My sweetheart?"

"It was Cuyler, no doubt."

She seemed startled about something for a moment. Then she said. "No. Cuyler was too smart for that. He was calling on Dad at the time, to have an alibi. Hatch did the shooting. Tom glimpsed him just as he fired. Hatch knew we would come to Gonzales after we had given him the slip. It was the nearest place of safety. So he came here too. That proves he never located the cache. He's continuing to watch us, hoping we will make an attempt to get the bullion sooner or later."

"How did Cuyler get hooked up with him?"

"Hatch used to work for Cuyler, helping trade and smuggle across the Border. Evidently Hatch needed Cuyler's help now. Hatch is just a ruffian who would slit a throat for a few pesos. But Cuyler has brains."

"But why would they want Tom Fitzhugh murdered if he was the man who would lead them to the cache?"

"I believe I know the answer to that too," she panted as they pushed through deeper brush. "They didn't want anyone to return to that cache right now. Not with Santa Anna's caballeria roaming that region. Cuyler and Hatch are greedy, but they'd prefer not to fall into Santa Anna's hands. With Tom out of the way they took it for granted that the cache would have to wait until Dad was able to travel. By that time traveling might be safer for everyone concerned. It meant delay, and having to watch Dad, but that was preferable to the risk."

ALEX thought it over. It dovetailed with the way Cuyler had prodded Tom Fitzhugh into the challenge to a duel. Cuyler evidently had a very agile mind. He had seen his chance to have Tom Fitzhugh killed, and divert suspicion elsewhere.

They were now following a saddlepath that led to the Guadalupe River. The glint of the stream showed in the starlight. A rasping voice spoke out from the darkness nearby.

"Thet you, Mis' Stacey. I was beginnin' to worry."

Alex made out the figure of a gnarled little man in buckskin breeches and hunting shirt and a round hat. Nearby in the shadows were a string of six tethered mules.

"Chape," the girl said, "this is Captain Alex Whipple. Captain, this is Chape Gillie. He is an old friend. He knows the country and you can always depend on him. Chape knows about the bullion. He and Tom were to have started west earlier tonight. Tom was on his way to this spot to meet Chape when he was shot."

She added, "Hurry! Let's get out of here. Jared Cuyler must have found out by this time that I have given him the slip. He'll be looking for us."

Chape Gillie led up the mules. Two of the animals carried high-pommeled Spanish saddles. The other four had pack saddles, including an extra pair, and a camp pack.

Chape Gillie handed Alex a rifle, a shot pouch, a powder horn and a pistol. He also gave the girl a pistol. "I raised you some hardware in case you forgot to bring any, Cap'n," he said. "You'll likely need it afore we've finished this jornada. We're headin' into touchy country."

The girl prepared to mount. Alex halted her. "You don't imagine we're going to let you go?" he snapped. "You can trust us to deliver the bullion to you."

"Of course I'm going. How else would you find the spot."

"You could draw a map."

"That's hopeless. We had no time for maps, and landmarks and measurements. Only a person who had been there could recognize the place."

"At times like these everybody has got to take their chances, Cap'n," Chape Gillie said reluctantly. "Even women folk. Sam Houston needs the loan of that gold. Needs it bad. An' right soon, if it's to do any good."

"Of course, Captain," Stacey said forgiving, "if you don't care to go—"

Alex glared at her. Then he lifted her into the saddle. He resented the way that contact with her brought the blood racing through him. Chape had mounted bareback, so he accepted the other saddled mule.

"You knew blasted well I would go," he said grimly to the girl. "You also knew I'd get in touch with you somewhere along the trail out of town. You were only waiting for me to show up. First you got me into a duel, and then tried to make a blackleg out of me. Next I came within an ace of being hung, and was forced to run like a rabbit. And now I'm deserting the army in the face of the enemy."

"I told Dad to speak to General Houston,

and explain your absence," she said demurely.

Alex glared helplessly. "You were sure of me, weren't you?" he fumed. "You arranged everything."

"I've found it thet way myself," Chape Gillie spoke sympathetically as he led the way into the river ford. "A feller thinks he's throwin' quite a shadow all by himself, an' then he ginerally finds thet some little piece o' calico has arranged fer the sun to shine at jest the right slant for him."

Stacey Tallifer said nothing as the mules splashed through the knee-deep crossing. She seemed satisfied with the situation.

CHAPTER SIX

Gold for Houston!

LEADING the three unburdened animals, they rode out of the river into the deep shadow of brush on the far bank. There Chape Gillie pulled up, and muttered an order for silence.

Presently Alex vaguely made out a horseman against the background of stars on a cut-bank on the opposite side of the stream. A man in a belled beaver hat. Cuyler!

Chape Gillie lifted his rifle, but the girl pushed it down. They sat holding their breath. Presently Cuyler turned his horse and rode away.

"I could ha' picked him off easy," Chape Gillie complained.

"And you might have missed," Alex said. "The shot would have told him what he wanted to know. He wasn't sure we crossed the ford. He couldn't see us over here."

"He'll know it come daybreak," Chape said. "Six mules leave a trail thet a baby could foller."

They headed west. Alex chafed at the slow gait of the mules.

"It'll be a danged sight slower comin' back," Chape said. "If'n we do come back. We'll be walkin'. The mules will be needed to pack the bullion. Thet's why I brung mules. They handle better under pack than horses."

They traveled until well after daybreak. Then Chape, who had scouted ahead, came hurrying back.

"Time to bush up," he said. "Mexican patrol a couple miles east. An' I smell plenty woodsmoke in the wind. Santa Anna's army ain't fur away. Thet smoke is from a big camp."

The girl glanced fearfully over her shoulder. Alex knew what she was thinking. They had traveled only twenty miles or so from the Guadalupe. Chape grinned soothingly at her.

"Why, bless you, Mis' Stacey," he said. "The only danger right now is from what's ahead. Cuyler will follow us—shore. He's likely trailin' us by this time. But we're safe from him as if we was in church listenin' to the preacher tell it scarey. Leastways we're safe 'til we git our hands on thet bullion."

"He means," said Alex, "that Cuyler won't kill the goose until he's sure it's laid the golden egg."

"Of course," Stacey said hollowly. She was tired, and she was scared and trying not to show it. She looked like a child who needed a hand to cling to.

Alex turned away. He'd be making a fool of himself for sure if he kept looking at her.

Alex and old Chape spelled each other at standing watch during the day. On two occasions Santa Anna's patrols passed in the distance, but did not approach their camp.

The weather changed during the day. A north wind set in, and a chill gray overcast broke the humid spell. It began to rain as they finished off a hurried meal at dusk.

They mounted and rode through a chill, driving downpour as bleak darkness came. They headed north, hoping to swing clear of Santa Anna's advance during the night.

Chape had brought a poncho for the girl, but evidently scorned such indulgences for himself and Alex.

CHAPE berated the weather, but not because of the discomfort it brought. "Rainin' jest hard enough so the mules will leave a mud trail," he lamented, "an' not hard enough to wash out the tracks."

Alex chilled to the bone in his soaked uniform as they rode steadily through a night as black as a well.

Occasionally he dismounted and walked, seeking by exercise to drive the cold from his marrow. Stacey followed his example each time, trotting along at his side, helping him lead the mule string.

Once her hand slipped into his. Alex held it longer than he should before he released it.

She suddenly spoke out of the darkness. "When they accused you of shooting Tom Fitzhugh, why didn't you tell them I could exonerate you?"

"Why—that is, I wasn't given the chance," Alex said. "They were in such a lather to rush me into a noose."

"And another reason was that it would have caused some embarrassment for me to explain why I was at your quarters at that time," she said. "You would still have been a perfect gentleman, even dangling from a rope."

She wasn't being fair. She had no right to belittle him after all this trouble he was going to to help her. "Even a gentleman has his limitations," Alex said savagely. "What I ought to do is turn you over my knee and teach you better manners."

Chape Gillie spoke approvingly. "A tannin'

now an' then is good for the best of 'em. Once they think they got a man under their thumb they shore run roughshod over him."

"I'm sure I wouldn't care to place a thumb near Captain Whipple," Stacey said loftily. "He'd probably snap it off. Such a testy person."

But, with her usual inconsistency, she was clinging to his hand again, before long, as they struggled through the rain and darkness.

They reached a creek, dark and rushing in the night. "We'll give Cuyler somethin' to think about from here on," Chape said.

They entered the creek, and waded upstream, dragging the reluctant mules through the chill water. The stream was shallow, but they occasionally floundered into deeper holes. It made little difference to Alex and old Chape, for they were rainsoaked anyway, but Alex could now hear Stacey's teeth chattering as loud as his own.

He finally put an arm around her, helping her along. That made him feel warmer at least. And she seemed to endure the cold a little better also.

"All this messy business will delay your wedding, of course," Alex said.

"My wedding? It won't matter. I hadn't made any definite plans anyway."

Alex wished he hadn't brought up the infernal subject. He suddenly felt glum, and cold again.

After an hour of hardship in the stream they left by way of a terrace of hardrock that would leave little trace of their passing.

"That stunt might hold 'em up a couple hours," Chape said. "Depends on whether there's a good trailer with 'em."

"You think there are more than Cuyler and Hatch to deal with?" the girl asked anxiously.

"Most likely. You said Hatch had two fellers helpin' when they tried to git the gold in the first place. Chances are they're still in on the deal."

The rain tapered off at daybreak. The area in which they found themselves had been settled, but it had been abandoned when the Runaway Scrape started.

THEY passed clearings and deserted houses. Doors stood open to the weather, with discarded effects scattered about, showing the wild haste of the flight. Lost dogs fled before them. Hogs and cattle trampled down young corn and gardens, unmolested.

There was no sign of human life. They made camp in an abandoned log house. The smokehouse was filled with bacon, and the meal barrel was half full. They feasted on bacon and hoecakes and hominy. Stacey did the cooking, and seemed to be very adept at the art. They dried their clothes and were warm again.

They saw no sign of the caballeria, and Chape believed they had passed clear of Santa Anna's army.

But they had not lost Hatch and Cuyler. Late in the afternoon Chape left on a scout. He was gone until after dark. When he came back, he said simply, "Four of 'em all right. An' they're close."

He had circled a few miles to cross their own backtrail and had picked up the sign of four pursuers who had followed that trail only an hour or so behind them.

They pushed the mules that night and Chape tried every artifice he knew to blind their trail. They halted at dawn, and Alex lifted Stacey from the saddle. They ate a cold meal. They were veering south again.

They held a conference. Stacey and Chape bent over maps they drew with sticks in the soil. "We kin reach the cache by nightfall if we keep goin'," Chape decided. "I don't like travelin' in daylight. There's some settlements off to the south, an' they're loyal Mexicans. We might be sighted, an' reported to Santa Anna. On 'tother hand Cuyler will figure we'll camp as usual all day. Maybe we kin steal a march on him."

"It's time to begin taking chances," Alex said. "If we can't shake him off our trail how about me staking out and stopping him while you two go ahead?"

Stacey got to her feet. starting to voice a swift objection. Chape saved her the trouble.

"We'll try to lose 'em first," he said. "If'n that don't work, I reckon we'll have to try your plan. One man couldn't do much ag'in 'em, I'm afeard. They're smart. They know all the tricks. We better stick together as long as we kin. The damn odds are ag'in us as it is."

They mounted and rode on. They felt uneasy riding in open daylight. The skies had cleared, and a hot sun was shining again. They had grown almost nocturnal in thought and habit. Alex felt almost naked in open daylight.

Each open stretch made him want to dismount and crawl. Every bluff and ridge in the distance, every grove of postoak, and every pecan thicket along the creeks offered the possibility of watching eyes that might bring Santa Anna's scouts in search of them.

And then there was Cuyler. Always Cuyler, dogging their trail, waiting until the goose laid the golden egg.

But around them nothing stirred except an occasional deer in the brush or wild cattle. At noon they faced a ten-mile stretch of open savannah, with scarcely a tree to break the monotony of stirrup-high grass that lay smiling in the sun. This open stretch must be crossed. Beyond lay wrinkled hills in which the girl said the bullion was cached.

CHAPTER SEVEN

To San Jacinto

THEY rode into that open grass plain, and it seemed like a treadmill to them. They were vulnerable to discovery by any lookout in the hills who could observe this plain for miles.

Still, they saw no one, and when they finally reached the grateful concealment of the hills at mid-afternoon they looked at each other. The strain was on them now, drawing them out fine as taut wire. Stacey's eyes were bright with the brightness of overwrought nerves. There were dark circles beneath them however, and she looked thinner.

Alex's uniform was a ruin. He looked like a pirate with a four-day growth of dark beard making his lean cheeks leaner than ever.

Chape Gillie seemed immune to fatigue, but his nerves were on edge too. Mounting higher in the hills they paused when they had a birds-eye view of the grass plain they had just crossed.

They sat watching it for a quarter of an hour. Far, far to the south a carreta crawled toward the chimney smoke of some jacal on the horizon. A few wild cattle could be seen here and there. But their own route remained vacant in the afternoon sun.

Chape relaxed. "Looks like we stole thet march on Cuyler," he said. "He must have figured we'd camp all day as usual. We got a safe lead on him now."

Alex kept looking back. Chape probably was right, but it seemed almost too good to be true. Too easy. But that open plain, which had been anathema to them when they were crossing it, was an ally now. Its vacancy was tantamount to an assurance that Cuyler was no longer right at their heels, at least.

They rode on. Presently they descended to a small stream. Stacey pointed to weathered wagon tracks in a stretch of 'dobe soil. "We came this way after caching the bullion," she said.

After another mile she pulled up. It was nearly sundown. Livestock dotted rounded, rock-studded knolls. She led the way to where rabbit brush grew thickly around a rubble of boulders at the base of a knoll.

"This is the place," she said, matter-of-fact.

It was as simple as that. No romantic treasure cave. No buried riches. Alex dragged aside dead brush and leaves and stood looking, a trifle let down, at grimy, dull-hued pigs of metal that lay in the crevices among the boulders in the thicket. He understood now why a map would have been worthless.

"Every knoll around here looks the same," he said. "How did you remember the right place, Stacey?"

She smiled. "I suppose a person just doesn't forget where they've laid aside that amount of gold."

"We'll take the stuff back to the edge o' that savannah," Chape decided. "We'll give the mules a few hours rest, then cross a'ter dark an' try to travel as fast as we kin from here on in."

The ingots were astoundingly heavy for their size. They discarded the riding saddles, and divided the bullion up among the six animals, lashing the ingots securely down.

Alex was throwing a hitch when the mule he was working on suddenly flung up its head, and stood with legs apart, staring at something behind him, its ears cocked.

Alex had learned during these nights and days how acute were the sight and hearing of these beasts. It might be a deer, or a bear the mule had scented. But the uneasiness that had ridden Alex since crossing the open plain came suddenly to a head now.

He had laid his rifle nearby on a boulder. He spoke now in a murmur. "Chape! Stacey! The mule's scented something. Duck!"

Moving suddenly, he pushed the girl to cover back of a boulder. He snatched up his rifle and dove down beside her. Chape also had flopped flat, and was starting to wriggle toward his rifle.

The alert mule had saved their lives—for the moment at least. But the animal paid for that with its own life.

RIFLES exploded from three points an instant after Alex made his move. He heard a bullet strike the mule. The animal turned uncertainly on its long legs. Then it crumpled abruptly and rolled over on its side.

The shot that had killed it probably had been intended for Alex. The other two bullets must have been aimed at Chape, but they missed their quarry. Evidently the marksmen had been startled when their targets vanished to cover and had fired belatedly, hoping to drop them.

For a moment Alex and the girl instinctively tried to grovel deeper into the unyielding earth.

Fools, Alex thought bitterly. What fools they had been for thinking they had stolen a march on Cuyler.

Now that they were trapped it was easy to see that Cuyler must have crossed that open plain ahead of them. He had been waiting in the hills, watching them, and had picked them up again as they covered the final leg to the cache.

Alex came out of his panic. Three shots from muzzle-loading rifles had been fired. Two seemed to have come from a shallow drywash about a hundred yards away and one from some point to the left of that depression.

Alex came to his feet. Charge 'em, Chape! Their guns are empty. Get 'em before they can reload!"

Attack was their only hope. Chape leaped to his feet and they raced toward the coulee, their rifles ready.

Where was the fourth man, Alex was thinking? There had been four of them. Where was the rifle that had not yet been fired?

He knew a bullet was sure to come at him or Chape at any moment.

Two men suddenly burst from the shallow coulee ahead, like rabbits before a ferret. One was still fumbling with a powderhorn. The other—Monk Hatch—had succeeded in getting a charge in his gun. Hatch started to lift the weapon to shoot at Alex.

Chape fired without pausing in stride. Alex saw Hatch go down. The second man, his rifle still useless, dropped the gun, and lifted his arms, shouting for mercy.

Alex turned, seeking sight of the one who had fired from boulders to the left. He glimpsed the man crawling to better cover. It wasn't Cuyler. Where was Cuyler?

It came then—the bullet from the fourth rifle that Alex had expected. Alex had been moving, crouching, peering around, or the ball might have killed him. It was like a hammer blow on his right shoulder. He found himself lying on his face.

He arose dazedly to his knees. Powder-smoke drifted from a boulder on the rim of the knoll above. A head appeared. Cuyler.

Alex lifted his rifle and fired off-hand, as he would in a turkey shoot. Cuyler's head vanished. It didn't appear again. Cuyler was smarter than a turkey, Alex thought vaguely.

Then Alex wondered why his empty rifle seemed so infernally heavy. For the second time he fell to the ground and didn't know how he had got there. When he tried to get up, he couldn't make it.

Chape was crouching nearby, and had finished reloading. With detached interest Alex watched Chape fire at that third ambusher who was now retreating.

"Missed the cuss," Chape raged. "Wal, two of 'em are skedaddlin', but we stopped the clocks of Hatch and Cuyler. I reckon them two won't bother us much, now that the big fry have been taken care of."

Stacey came running. Alex tried to shout, "Look out, Stacey. Cuyler's up on the knoll, reloading to—"

His voice seemed faint, far away. Wonderingly he saw that Stacey was crying. No shot came from the knoll.

"Don't fret about Cuyler, son," Chape said. "That shot of yours was about as purty a one as I've ever seen."

Alex looked up at Stacey's face. Then she was actually kissing him. This was wonderful. But it was forbidden. "Mustn't do that, Stacey," he murmured. "Tom wouldn't like it."

"It's my sister that's going to marry Tom Fitzhugh," Stacey wailed. "And I'm going to marry you, Alexander Whipple. Oh, Chape! Help me! He's dying!"

"I am not dying," Alex mumbled. "I'm going to marry you, Stacey. You're a vixen. A beautiful vixen. You've got me under your thumb and I like it. I love you to pieces."

"I reckon as long as he feels that way he ain't figgerin' on kickin' any bucket," Chape said.

About the next thing Alex remembered clearly was that he was on a travois, which was what they called the framework on two drag poles the Indians used. Chape had made the affair and it was drawn by a mule.

Stacey was walking beside him.

"You're going to be all right, dear," she said. "We'll camp as soon as we find a safe place until you're able to travel."

She was a mighty fascinating baggage even in her present garb.

It was three weeks later when they overtook Houston's army as it retreated from the Brazos. Alex was beginning to get back on his feet.

They came into the army camp at dark, bringing with them the trail-gaunt mules whose burdens seemed small for so many pack animals to carry.

Houston was moving toward the San Jacinto River, Alex learned. Alex had never heard of the river, but it was evident that a battle was coming at last. Santa Anna had split his command into three parts now, and Houston evidently had a plan.

General Houston came personally to meet them. He looked at the canvas-covered packloads and smiled. He kissed Stacey's hand. "Your father has been moved to Harrisburg," he said. "I will get in touch with him soon, and make the necessary arrangements. Texas can use this help now."

Then he shook hands with Alex, "And my thanks to you also, Colonel Whipple."

After he had left them Alex looked at Stacey. "You now have your first opportunity to kiss a colonel, dear 'ady," he said. "That last man you kissed several hours ago was nothing but a brevet captain."

"It was only five minutes ago," Stacey said. "But—if you insist—"

Around them Houston's ragged army was on the march again, toward a place called San Jacinto. Soon Alex would be joining them, but right now he wasn't thinking of battle-smoke or military glory. He had more immediate—and much more pleasant—concerns.

THE END

He'd tackle any man with fist, knife or gun. . . .

PINT-SIZE MAN-KILLER

By Gene Kivett

Burton Mossman, boss of the Hashknife cattle outfit, had a little body, little feet and little hands—but his little gun dug some damned big graves!

SHOTGUN Smith and some friends were at the bar in the Holbrook Hotel. Shotgun, who could out-talk any man in Arizona, gulped his fourth shot of forty-rod, thumped the glass hard on the mahogany, then turned to his companions.

"If I ever lay my eyes on Burton Mossman," he bawled, "I'll shoot him! By hell, I'll shoot him down without mercy!"

Shotgun Smith was riled at Burton Mossman, boss of the Hashknife cattle outfit, because Mossman had had him arrested on a charge of rustling Hashknife stock. There hadn't been enough evidence for a conviction, however, and the jury had returned a not-guilty verdict a few minutes before. Now Shotgun and his cronies were in the bar drinking to his acquittal of the charge.

"Yes siree," Shotgun continued in a loud voice, "the instant I lay eyes on that Mossman, he's a goner!"

At this moment the batwings swung apart, admitting a new customer to the bar. The newcomer was a short, stunted little man with small hands and feet. He wore the fancy clothes of a dude. Hand-made boots had padded heels to give him added height. The pair of Colt .45s he wore made him look a little comical—like a strutting boy playing outlaw.

The little gent, unnoticed by anyone in the room, sauntered up to the group at the bar. He stood there, listening to Shotgun Smith make his threats.

Presently the little man reached up and tapped Shotgun on the back. Shotgun whirled around and looked at the intruder. Instantly Shotgun ceased talking and his face paled.

The little man didn't say anything. He just stood there, staring Shotgun Smith in the eye.

Shotgun gulped, then blurted, "Why—er—Mr. Mossman, I was just funnin' here with the boys! Hope there ain't gonna be any hard feelin's between you and me, Mr. Mossman!"

"Not as long as you keep your mouth shut there won't be any trouble!" Mossman said. "But if I hear you threatening me any more, I'll call your hand and kill you! Now get out of my sight and stay out!"

Shotgun quickly picked up his change from the bar and left the room—and stayed out of Mossman's sight. . . .

Despite his small stature and dudish appearance, Burton Mossman was a match for any man, and more than a match for most. His cold gray eyes could outstare those of the toughest killer; his hands could and often did handle a pair of six-shooters with the dexterity of a juggler throwing tenpins.

As foreman of the Aztec Cattle Company, known locally as the Hashknife outfit, the diminutive Mossman won the rep as a fighting fool. He'd tackle any one man, or any three men, with fist, knife or gun. He personally killed off or sent to the pen a score of men caught rustling on the Hashknife range.

When the Arizona legislature authorized Governor Murphy to organize a company of Rangers, the Governor offered the commission of captain to Mossman. The pay was only half as much as he was drawing as ramrod of the Hashknife spread. But a love for the smell of gunsmoke was strong in Mossman and he was pleased to accept the appointment.

Captain Mossman's Ranger outfit comprised thirteen men. As soon as the company was formed, the governor gave Mossman the order: "Clear the Arizona Territory of all rustlers and outlaws!"

The Rangers proceeded to the task by first taking to the trail of Bill Daniels and his owl-hoot crew. This band had recently robbed a post office near Fort Sumner and ruthlessly killed one man who had his hands up.

After a running gun-battle, Mossman and his men finally surrounded the outlaws. Then, recklessly exposing themselves, the Rangers closed in on the gang. A bloody, close-in fight ensued. Those few outlaws who weren't killed were taken prisoner.

BURTON MOSSMAN'S best known feat as a Ranger was the running to earth of the infamous Augustine Chacon. Chacon was the leader of a pack of rapacious killers who murdered and robbed at will along the Border. Chacon himself was probably the deadliest Mexican gunman of all time. Strictly a killing machine, he was known to have personally dispatched twenty-eight men.

The Chacon gang made their headquarters in the Sierra Madre Mountains. After a raiding expedition into Arizona, the band would dash across the Border and hole up in their mountain stronghold.

Several American posses had engaged the gang in running battles. Many of the outlaws had been killed, but Chacon himself seemed blessed with luck. He'd always manage to save his own hide and reach his hideout safely.

Burton Mossman determined either to capture or kill Augustine Chacon. He decided the best way to do it would be to work alone.

At that time a treacherous and dangerous American outlaw, named Burt Alvord, was a fugitive in Mexico. Alvord had ridden with Chacon on some of his robbing expeditions. Mossman knew this, and it occurred to him that Alvord would be just the man to introduce him to the Mex killer. The Ranger captain figured that if he could meet Chacon he could convince him that he himself was an outlaw and induce him to let him ride with him. Thus, Mossman would be in a good position to kill or capture the noted murderer.

Now Mossman divested himself of his ordinary fancy duds, put on old range clothes and rode alone into Mexico. From Sheriff Tom Turner of Santa Cruz he had learned the general whereabouts of Alvord.

For two weeks the disguised Mossman scouted the hilly Mexican country. He was about to give up his quest when one day he came across an isolated adobe shack, with a white man standing in the doorway. Mossman recognized the man as Alvord from pictures he'd seen of the outlaw.

Mossman reined up in the yard, and asked, "Are you Burt Alvord, the American outlaw?"

Alvord was startled by the unorthodox question, but he nodded, then demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm Captain Mossman of the Arizona Rangers."

"The hell you say!" Alvord shot a hand to his gun-butt, eyed Mossman questioningly.

The Ranger grinned. "I don't want you," he explained. "But I'm here to see you on important business."

Mossman spent the night with the outlaw. And it took most of the night for the Ranger to persuade Alvord to introduce him to Chacon. Alvord agreed only after Mossman promised to pay him any reward that he might get for capturing or killing the Mex killer. The outlaw told Mossman to return to Arizona and await instructions from him. Alford was to send a message to the Ranger when the meeting had been arranged.

IT WAS three months before Mossman got the message. This was in July, 1902. Billy Stiles, an American outlaw, delivered the note.

"You and the bearer meet Chacon and myself at Socorro Mountain spring, nine days from now."

Mossman and Stiles rode to the appointed place, a few miles below the Border. There they met Alvord and Chacon. The Mex killer was a tall man and lithe as a cat. He had the cold, emotionless eyes of a cat. He wore two sixguns and carried a rifle.

Chacon laughed outright when he was told that Mossman was a hardened outlaw. "Why the little hombre ain't big enough to pack a six-shooter, much less use one!" the Mexican sneered.

However, he agreed to let Mossman join in with them. Chacon announced that they would that very night cross over into Arizona and steal a band of blooded horses from Green's ranch.

After nightfall, the four rode north toward the ranch. Captain Mossman now realized that he'd let himself in for a hard job. Getting the drop on the Mex killer would be hard to accomplish, for the crafty Chacon was eternally suspicious of everything and everybody.

Mossman knew that if Chacon suspected his real identity he would of course instantly shoot him in the back. Moreover, the ranger didn't know but what he himself was the victim of a ruse. Maybe Alvord and Stiles were double-crossing him and planning, in cahoots with Chacon, to murder him.

The four men rode along through the moonless night. It began to grow cloudy. Soon there was no starlight. Chacon announced then that it was too dark to round up horses, and that they would make camp and continue on to Green's ranch when daylight came.

The men spread their blankets in a draw. Mossman lay there awake, wondering if he should try to take Chacon while he slept. He decided against it, knowing that the wily killer doubtless slept with one eye open.

Just before dawn Burt Alvord slipped over to where Mossman lay. "I did my part," Alvord whispered, "but you don't seem to have the guts to throw a gun on Chacon! I'm clearing out before Chacon suspects what's up!"

Alvord slipped out of camp, quietly saddled his mount and rode off.

At dawn Stiles got up and built a fire out of greasewood. Mossman started preparing the bacon and beans for breakfast. Chacon squatted by the fire and eyed Mossman and Stiles with ever-growing suspicion. Since Alvord had mysteriously left camp during the night, the Mexican sensed that something was wrong.

Mossman knew now that the time for action had come. He would either have to kill Chacon or capture him, lest he himself be shot down at any moment.

Mossman was hunkered by the fire, holding a pan of frying bacon. The Mex was directly across the fire from him, resting on his haunches. Stiles was off some distance, gathering wood. The Ranger set the pan down, then slowly rolled a cigarette. He reached and pulled a burning twig from the fire, lit the quirley.

Mossman flipped the smouldering twig back into the fire. His hand, after releasing the twig, kept streaking on down—toward his gun.

The cunning, eternally alert killer saw the movement and made a pass for his own right-hand gun.

"Don't!" Mossman barked, his gun out and covering the Mexican. "Don't make a move!"

Chacon shrugged, then grinned. "Is this some kind of a joke?" he asked.

"The funniest joke you'll ever hear of, Chacon!" Mossman said. "I'm an Arizona Ranger; and you're going to stand trial for the murder of a dozen ranchers!"

Mossman ordered Stiles to disarm Chacon. Then the Ranger got a pair of handcuffs from his saddlebags, snapped them on the killer, then headed for the Ranger Headquarters.

Chacon was given a fair trial—then hanged at Solomonville.

BATTLE CALL FOR THE BUSHWHACK WAR

John Jo Carpenter

Vince Turley would fight—and he did not want to fight—for the son who was in the wrong. And, from that moment on, it would be war to the death with his neighbors! And Vince *liked* his neighbors! So Turley primed his gun—and set out to try to bushwhack God!

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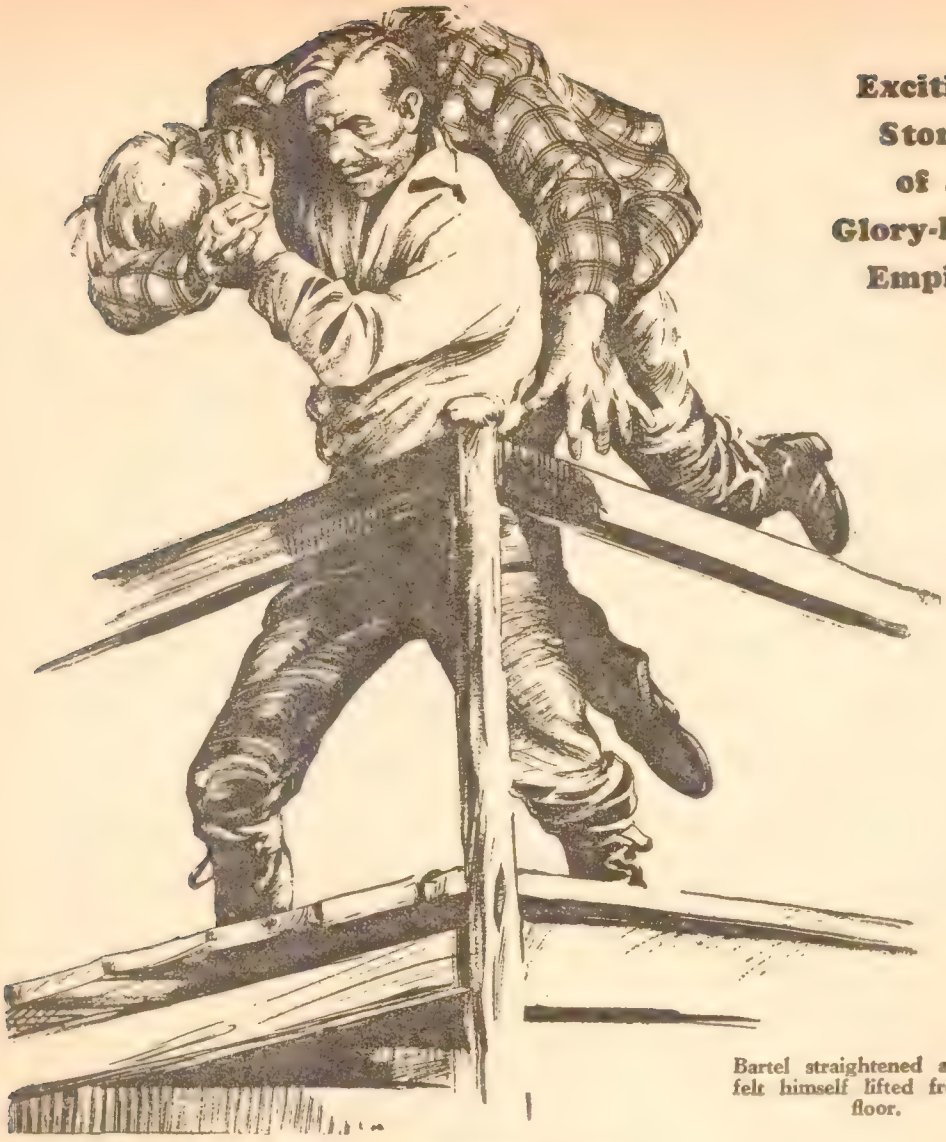
NEW BOSS FOR HELL'S HIGH-GRADERS

By Philip Ketchum

When two-fisted Jim Bartel took over as trouble-shooter of Consolidated Mine, the front office in far-off Chicago forgot to tell him the only raise he could expect in that boot-tough mucker empire—would be at the end of a strong hemp rope!

Exciting Story of a Glory-Hole Empire



Bartel straightened and Joe felt himself lifted from the floor.

CHAPTER ONE

New Boss for Double-Cross Mine

HE ARRIVED in Ludlow on the morning stage and his arrival went wholly unnoticed. He was a short man and a little stocky. One might have thought he was beginning to get fat but he wasn't. He weighed close to two hundred pounds and almost every pound of that weight was hard muscle.

He carried his bag from the stage station to a building marked LUDLOW HOTEL, and signed the register in a scarcely readable scrawl. The man at the desk didn't even glance at the name. He put a room number after it and gave Bartel a key, and said the room was down the corridor.

It was more of a stall than a room but Bartel meant to sleep there only one night. There was a pitcher of water and a basin on a

crude stand. Bartel took off his coat. He poured some water in the basin and washed his hands and face and then stared at his reflection in the cracked mirror on the wall. He was in his early thirties but looked older. He had gray eyes set far apart under a high forehead, a straight nose and lips which made a tight line above a square jaw. His hair was almost sandy colored. He had a good tan. He didn't smile at the face which looked back at him from the mirror and he didn't study it long. He had never worried much about how he looked.

Ten minutes after Bartel entered his room he left it and spent the next two hours on Ludlow's twisting, narrow street. He entered a dozen saloons and gambling halls, stood around for a while and then left. No one paid much attention to him. Out on the street two men tried to sell him a mining claim they confidentially told him was worth millons but Bartel only smiled and shook his head.

He had his dinner in a hot, crowded restaurant. The food was greasy and unpalatable but he didn't complain. In the afternoon he walked back of the town to where he could see the office and main shaft of the Consolidated mine and the wide, long stairway leading up to the Consolidated yard. There were other workings beyond and on up the canyon, but none of them very large.

The town of Ludlow was built in a narrow, twisting canyon with room for only one street and buildings on either side. To the east and west rose high hills. Rich gold ore had been found here less than a year ago and the town had been born overnight. Six months before and after brief deliberations the Consolidated Mining Company had bought this rich property and had taken options on several others, but Ludlow, from all reports and from what Bartel could see, still bore the characteristics of a wildcat mining town. New claims were being recorded, bought and sold. Prices were sky high and money was cheap. Gamblers and women of shady morals and mining and food speculators roamed the streets.

Bartel had come here with a good deal of knowledge of the town and of its important citizens and during the morning, afternoon and evening, he checked certain points which he thought might be important. He listened to talk on the street corners and in the saloons and around the gambling tables. He paid a casual visit to the Ludlow Freighting Company, whose wagons hauled the gold ore to the nearest railhead fifty miles to the south. He studied the town marshal's office from a point across the street and in the early evening he was in the California Bar, noticing the number of men who came in by the back way. It was quite late before he went to bed.

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, Bartel turned in between the California Bar and Miles store and climbed the wide stairway to the Consolidated office. More than two hundred men had climbed these steps an hour before and had passed through the gate at the top and had crossed over to the shaft and been lowered into the mine. There was a wide yard here enclosed by a steel fence. The loading racks were to the right where there was another gate and where a narrow, twisting road started down the side of the hill.

There were two men behind the counter in the room Bartel entered. One was an old man pouring over a ledger and putting down figures. The other stood at a window looking out into the yard. His back was to Bartel. He was thin but had a good pair of shoulders. His hair was dark and thick. To one side was a door marked PRIVATE.

"I'd like to see Vic Alcott," Bartel said quietly.

The young man at the window turned. He had a nice face in spite of its scowl. "Alcott's busy," he said shortly.

"Is someone with him?" Bartel asked.

The young man shook his head.

Bartel moved around the counter. "Then I'll go right in."

The man at the window took a step forward, then stopped. The older man didn't even look up. Bartel reached the door, opened it, stepped inside and closed it behind him.

This private office was as large as the room outside. A carpet was on the floor, cabinets at one end, a round table and chairs, a couch and a desk. A thick-bodied man with a dark, tight-skinned face and straight black hair was seated behind the desk. He looked about forty. He needed a shave and sleep. His eyes were bleary.

"Who are you and what do you want?" the man behind the desk asked.

Bartel drew a letter from his pocket, walked forward and handed it over and stood quietly while it was opened and read. Bartel knew exactly what was in the letter. It was addressed to Vic Alcott, superintendent of the Consolidated Mining Company's properties in the Ludlow district, and it notified him that on the presentation of the letter he was to turn over his responsibilities to James Bartel. This probably wasn't the first time Alcott had seen the letter. A copy of it had been mailed to him a week before.

"So you're Bartel," Alcott muttered.

Bartel nodded.

"How the hell do I know you're Bartel?"

"I'm telling you."

"So I'm just to walk out of here, huh?"

"That's right."

Alcott came abruptly to his feet. "I'll be damned if I will! No bunch of men in an

office in Chicago is going to kick me out like this. If they want to get rid of me let 'em come out here and try it. I'm running Consolidated in Ludlow."

"You mean you were running Consolidated in Ludlow," Bartel corrected. "Two minutes ago you were through. I don't like to do it this way but you've got exactly another five minutes to collect your personal property from your desk and get out."

"Why you—"

"Wait a minute, Alcott," Bartel broke in, his voice cutting like a whip. "The ore you've been shipping out of here hasn't been running more than sixty per cent as high as tests show that it should. The best ore being mined is going out of here every night in the pockets of the miners. They sell it at half its value in the back room of the California Bar and you and Carl Tanner split the profit. Consolidated can prove that. We can't arrest you here, right now, because Pete Alcott, your own brother, is marshal and is in this with you. But there'll be a federal officer after you in a damned short time. A warrant has already been sworn out for your arrest."

"That's a damned lie."

"Stick around town and find out, Alcott."

"By God I will. And I'll stick around right here."

Bartel shook his head. There was a tight stubborn look on his face. "You have less than five minutes now, Alcott."

Alcott's hands knotted into fists. He came suddenly around the desk. "I'll show you who gets out," he shouted. "I'll show you!"

HIS fist swung viciously at Bartel's head but Bartel had stepped back and the blow missed. Alcott caught his balance and lunged at the man again and suddenly Bartel exploded into action. A blow hammered Alcott in the face and another smashed against the side of his jaw. He straightened up and struck out at Bartel once more but Bartel was in too close to him, hammering him in the stomach. Alcott tried to back away but a right caught him under the chin and his legs started folding. He fell against the desk and slid to the floor.

The door from the outer office was open and the young man who had been standing near the window came into the room. He was staring at Bartel and the scowl was still on his face.

"What's this all about?" he demanded.

"Who are you?" Bartel asked.

"My name's Cavanaugh," the man answered. "I have charge of mining operations. Maybe you're going to have to take me on, too."

"Read the letter on the desk first, Cavanaugh."

Cavanaugh picked up the letter Bartel had given Alcott, read it and then laid it down. "So you're Jim Bartel."

"That's right."

"Alcott objected?"

Bartel nodded. He glanced down at Vic Alcott. The man was sitting up now, holding a handkerchief to his bleeding nose.

"What are you going to do?" Cavanaugh asked.

"I'm going to run Consolidated the way it ought to be run."

"And where does that leave me?"

Bartel shrugged. "I don't know, Cavanaugh. Where do you stand?"

Cavanaugh's scowl deepened. "If you mean did I know what was going on, the answer is yes? If you are asking whether or not I was cut in on the deal, the answer is no. It's my job to see that the mines are worked and that the ore is brought out. What happens to it afterwards is up to the superintendent."

"That's a pretty weak position to take, Cavanaugh."

Cavanaugh's face flushed. "I was hired to get the ore out and I can get it out."

Bartel crossed to the window and stared out into the yard. The first of the day's run of ore was already being brought to the surface and wagons were ready under the loading racks.

"In the next two weeks," Bartel said slowly, "we've got to get more ore and ore of a higher grade than any we've moved in the last six months. Can we do it?"

"The ore is there, Bartel. I can get it out. I can't see that it gets into those wagons."

Bartel turned away from the window. He crossed back to where Alcott was sitting. "Your time's up, Alcott," he said briefly. "Get out. Anything of yours that I find here I'll have delivered to you."

Vic Alcott got unsteadily to his feet. He still held a handkerchief against his nose. One eye was swollen almost shut but the other glared defiantly at Bartel.

"I'll get out," he said thickly, "but I'll be back, Bartel. I'll be back behind that desk before night. That's a promise."

Bartel made no answer. He stood where he was until Alcott had left the room, then walked around the desk and sat down. He was frowning. He had been afraid things would start off about like this and he had hoped to avoid it but it hadn't been possible.

"Vic Alcott means that," Cavanaugh said slowly.

Bartel shrugged.

"His brother is the marshal and will do anything Vic asks."

"Maybe so."

"If Pete Alcott should need help he can go to Carl Tanner who owns, among other

things, the California Bar, and who has as tough a crew working for him as you could ever find."

"Maybe."

"And if you try to stop the miners from highgrading you'll have a couple hundred more men on your neck."

"That so?"

Cavanaugh gave a short, bitter laugh. "How long do you think you'll last, Bartel? How long do you think you'll last?"

CHAPTER TWO

Take-a-Ride Invite

THE old man's name was Jeffries and in an ambling fashion he explained the bookkeeping and record systems. He didn't question Bartel's authority, didn't ask what had happened to Alcott. He didn't indicate that he had been aware of the fight. Perhaps he hadn't even heard it. He was a little deaf.

Cavanaugh had volunteered to explain to the yard and mine foremen the change in the front office but had said he would announce no change in policy, and after Bartel had finished his talk with Jeffries he went out and hunted up McCall, the yard foreman. "If you don't like the way I run things in the yard," McCall suggested, "just tell me. If I can change what you want me to, I will. If I can't, I'll quit."

Bartel had no immediate changes to suggest. The yard seemed to be running efficiently. The ore which came up the shaft was transferred promptly to the loading racks and then loaded into wagons, weighed and hauled away.

Mining operations such as this one were no new thing to Jim Bartel. His father had been a miner and he had grown up in mining camps. There weren't many jobs around a mine which he hadn't handled. Though still in the early thirties he had close to fifteen years experience behind him.

Just before noon Bartel walked through the gate and down the steps to Ludlow and two doors beyond the California Bar he turned into the Bank of Ludlow. A girl with fair hair and clear, blue eyes was behind the counter.

"I'd like to see Mr. Herndon," Bartel told her. "Mr. John Herndon."

"If it's about mining property," the girl said, "he wouldn't be interested in buying any, and he has none for sale. If it's a loan, this is a bad day to see him."

"And if it's neither?" Bartel asked.

The girl laughed. "I'm supposed to find out who wants to see him and why before I let anyone through the gate."

"Then tell him that Jim Bartel wants to see him and that Bartel is the new superintendent of the Consolidated properties."

The girl stiffened. "I thought Vic Alcott was superintendent."

"He was until this morning. He has resigned."

"He drew some money from the Consolidated account not an hour ago."

"How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"I'll ask him for it when I see him. Can I talk to Mr. Herndon now?"

The girl turned away and entered a room to the side. Bartel frowned. The girl's entire attitude had changed the moment he had mentioned Consolidated. She had seemed to freeze up. Her voice had hardened. Bartel wondered why.

The door to the side office opened and the girl came out. "Mr. Herndon will see you," she said coolly.

Bartel thanked her and walked into the banker's office. John Herndon was a man of about his own size but considerably older. He was bald excepting for a fringe of gray hair. His eyes were sharp and direct and his face had a pinched, suspicious, tight look about it.

"I understand you have taken over the management of Consolidated, Mr. Bartel," he started. "Can I ask you why Mr. Alcott was dismissed."

"Do you have to ask why?" Bartel answered.

"The Consolidated is heavily indebted to me. I have a very natural interest."

"Then suppose we say the change was made in the interest of Mr. John Herndon and Consolidated, both."

The banker shook his head. "I'm not sure of that. Alcott was a capable man."

"Alcott was a crook."

"That's a serious charge, young man."

"It's one that Consolidated can prove."

"I'm not sure of it."

"You should be. You knew he was crooked, Herndon. Everyone in Ludlow knows what's been going on and before we're through, others may suffer with him. Others who were involved in the plot against us."

Herndon's eyes narrowed. "That sounds like a threat?"

"Perhaps it is, but that isn't why I came here, Herndon. I came here to tell you that no more money is to be paid out of Consolidated accounts without my approval. Will you see that your clerks are informed."

"May I see your credentials?"

Bartel passed a second letter to the banker and stood waiting while Herndon read it. When he had finished the banker went to the door. "Miss Elstad," he called, "will you come here a moment?"

The girl Bartel had met at the counter came to the door of the room.

"Christine," the banker said, "this is Mr. Bartel, the new superintendent of Consolidated. Mr. Bartel, Christine Elstad."

Bartel nodded. He understood now why the girl's attitude had changed. It was Gurd Elstad who claimed to have discovered the gold in the hill above Ludlow. He had registered a claim in his name and in that of his daughter Christine. How he had been squeezed out of the picture, Bartel didn't know, but he had heard of the law suit Elstad had filed.

Herndon gave his instructions to Christine and asked her to pass them on to the two other employees in the bank. She nodded and turned away. She had not even looked at Bartel. She hadn't acknowledged the introduction.

"Is there anything more?" Herndon asked when Christine had gone.

Bartel shook his head. "Not right now."

"Consolidated," said Mr. Herndon, "will of course be ready when the first note falls due next month."

"That's why I am here," Bartel answered.

A frigid smile twisted the banker's lips. "You will probably have an interesting time."

Bartel said, "Probably," and turned to the door. Christine Elstad had some papers and cards for him to sign and he signed them and smiled at her and thanked her. He might as well have smiled at the wall.

BARTEL had dinner at a restaurant across the street and when he came out he noticed a tall, thin man standing in front of the California Bar. Bartel had been told before he came to Ludlow that Carl Tanner was tall and thin and never without his cigar. Tanner had on a black suit and fancy vest. His face was narrow and his nose too big. He had sharp, dark eyes and Bartel could see that the man was studying him, too.

"Nice day, Bartel," Tanner drawled.

Bartel stopped. He nodded his head. "A very fine day, Tanner."

"You know," Tanner said, "if a man had to die he couldn't pick a nicer day for it. Or if he'd rather take a trip, today would be ideal."

Jim Bartel grinned. He said, "Well, make your choice."

"Oh, it's not a choice I face," Tanner answered. "I'll be around here when some fellows I know are either gone or buried." As he spoke he took the cigar from his lips, flicked off the ash with his little finger and put the cigar back in his mouth. "You know, Bartel," he went on, "you can't change human nature. Now take miners, for instance. They're just naturally going to highgrade a little. You can't stop 'em. If you try it, well, you're going against nature and things that go against nature just don't last."

"That's one way to talk about nature."

"Are there any others?"

"Plenty of others. Did you ever grow a garden, Tanner?"

"Nope."

"Well, weeds are a part of nature, but if you want a good garden you pull them out or chop them off. Men can grow beautiful gardens but they've got to kill off the weeds. Towns are like that, too. We can have fine towns if we weed out the people who live off others and do no work of their own."

"Maybe I like weeds, Bartel," Tanner said reflectively.

Jim Bartel shook his head. "I don't."

He moved on past the man and turned up the steps to the Consolidated office. Waiting to see him were the two guards who were ordinarily on duty at the miners' gate. They were surly looking.

"We heard some things we don't like, Mr. Bartel," said one of them. "I reckon if it's true, we're quitting."

"What did you hear?" Bartel asked.

"We heard you were going to stop highgradin'."

"What were your jobs?"

"Well, we were supposed to be at the gate an'—that is, we—"

"You were supposed to be at the gate," said Bartel, "and see that none of the men leaving here staggered through the gate under a load of highgrade ore. Did you ever stop anyone?"

The man who had been doing the talking flushed. He bit at his lower lip.

"Turn in your guns and draw what pay you've got coming to you," Bartel snapped. "And then get the hell out of here. . . ."

After the guards had gone Jim Bartel dug out his pipe and lit it and smoked for a while, scowling at the blank wall across the room. It was all adding up just as they had figured it in the Consolidated offices back in Chicago. Alcott had approved of the highgrading and Tanner had backed him. The town marshal gave them support. The guards had never tried to stop it. There was even a good chance that John Herndon was in on the deal for Herndon might suspect that Consolidated was in a pretty shaken position and stood to gain a fortune if Consolidated couldn't meet its loan.

They had warned him of all this in Chicago. They had told him just what he would be going up against and they had advised him to go slow. How did a man go slow in a position like this? There was no way to go slow. You either controlled the situation or you didn't control it. A man could stall for a while but there wasn't enough time to stall. The first notes which Herndon held were due in less than three weeks and at the present rate of income Consolidated couldn't meet those notes.

Bartel went out in the yard and hunted up McCall. "Get word to the men down in the mine to stop work half an hour early," he ordered. "We'll have a meeting up here in the yard before the gates are opened."

McCall blinked. He looked a little doubtful. "I sure hope you know what you're doing, Bartel," he said slowly. "It's a pretty tough bunch of miners we've got working here."

THE men started coming up from the mine at four thirty and they gathered in ever-growing groups in the fenced yard. Jim Bartel watched from the office window, not at all surprised at what he saw, for the day before he had seen some of these men walking down the steps. Most wore bulky coats, bulky because the linings were stuffed with selected ore. All day these men had laid aside the finest ore they had chipped from the vein. A lump the size of a man's hand might be worth fifty dollars and might sell in the back room of the California Bar for twenty-five. Some of these men were getting rich in a hurry, were making so much money through high-grading that wages had lost all value.

Word that a new superintendent had taken over and that changes were in the offing, had reached them. In what way, Bartel didn't know, but he had worked in mines himself long enough to know how quickly a rumor could travel.

It was an ominously quiet crowd gathering in the yard and the men looked fully as tough as McCall had indicated. But any group which had been underground all day and at pretty hard labor, would look tough. Bartel told himself that as he stared at the men through the window and knew that it didn't mean anything. A baby would cry if you took a stick candy away from it and that was about what he was going to do. He left the office and went outside and stood on the porch facing the yard. The men started moving closer, gathering tight around the office. They looked up at him with scowling, dirt-smeared faces.

"I suppose I ought to tell you who I am," Bartel started, and he didn't shout. "My name's Bartel and I'm the new superintendent."

"Who the hell cares about that?" someone called.

"You will before I'm through," Bartel answered. "You will because of several things I'm going to say. In the first place, the gate will be opened as soon as I've finished talking. You can all walk out of here and line up as usual behind the California Bar. I hope you brought up plenty of good color for yourselves for today is the last day any of you will walk through that gate loaded down like you are tonight."

"Who the hell's gonna stop us tomorrow, mister?" called the same voice which had interrupted before.

"I am," Bartel answered bluntly.

"Like hell you will. I'll walk through that gate as loaded down as I want to. No pint-sized squirt from the city is gonna tell me what to do."

"Maybe you'd like to come up here and show these men how you mean to walk through me tomorrow night," Bartel invited.

"You bet I will," the man shouted. "Here I come now."

Bartel hadn't been able to pick out the man before but as he started pushing his way forward he could see that he was a short, stocky, bearded fellow. His coat, with a strong canvas lining, bulged with the ore the man was carrying.

The promise of a fight appealed to the crowd and brought a sense of excitement. "Go get him, Joe," someone shouted. "We're all backin' you up."

"Good luck, Joe," another called. "Not that you'll need it, but good luck anyhow."

Other men bawled remarks to the bearded man pushing forward. Joe grinned and waved his hands. At the bottom of the office steps he took off his coat and then he started up.

Bartel waited quietly. This was as unavoidable as his trouble with Alcott had been. It was something which had to be faced. He watched the man coming up the steps, saw the scowl gathering on his face and saw the man stop as he reached the porch.

The man put his arms out in front of him and folded them, grasping his forearms with either hand. "I walk through people like this," he said grimly, and started forward.

The man meant to walk right up against him and shove him through the thin railing around the porch. He meant to come so fast that he could risk a blow or two. He meant to use the weight of his body against Bartel in a quick, heavy thrust.

Bartel backed up and Joe grinned and came on, faster. Bartel was close to the railing. Joe thrust ahead. Suddenly Bartel ducked down and an arm caught Joe in his crotch and a hand slipped up under one of his arms. Bartel straightened and Joe felt himself lifted from the porch floor. A cry broke from his lips.

To the men below it looked as though Bartel had simply picked up the man and pitched him over his head and into the crowd below.

Joe's body, sprawling through the air, struck two men and carried them with him to the ground; even so, the stocky man hit the ground hard and for a moment didn't move. The other two got up and then Joe rolled over and got on his knees and stayed there for a moment, shaking his head back and forth.

Bartel looked down on this soberly and without smiling, and then, just as though nothing at all had occurred, he went on talking.

"This is going to be pretty tough on some of you," he went on, "for it costs plenty to live in Ludlow. I'd like to suggest this. I'd like to suggest that you appoint a committee of men to meet with me and talk over the matter of wages. Consolidated will do the fair thing, but highgrading, on any scale at all, is going to stop."

"What if we won't work for you, mister?" someone asked.

"Well, if we can't get enough men to run the mine, we'll just close down."

"You won't make any money for Consolidated that way."

"We're not making any now and you know it and know why. The gate is open, fellows. When you sell your stuff to Tanner tonight, make him pay plenty."

There were a few who even laughed at that remark but most of the men didn't. And there were a good many who hung around after Bartel had gone back into his office. They talked things over. Most of them seemed to feel that they could get Tanner's backing and that Bartel wouldn't last very long if he tried to stand in the way.

CHAPTER THREE

Strong Arm Committee

JIM BARTEL didn't have a place to stay and asked Ed Cavanaugh what he ought to do. It was almost seven o'clock and he and Cavanaugh had been in the office going over production figures for almost two hours.

"Pat Maloney might have a place," Cavanaugh said thoughtfully.

"Where does he live?"

"I'll show you."

"You're sure you won't mind being seen with me outside the office?"

A flush of color came into Cavanaugh's face. "I'll risk it."

They went to Maloney's and Bartel made arrangements for a room and afterwards moved his bag there. It was dark by this time and he was hungry and Cavanaugh, who was still with him, suggested Elane's. They went there and found a table at the back of a long, narrow room. The food was the best Bartel had found since he had been here and he enjoyed the meal. Cavanaugh opened up a little while they were eating and talked about himself. He was a university man, had studied mining in the east. This was his first big job and he was anxious to put it over. From the production figures Bartel had seen he was doing pretty well.

"Going to turn in now?" Cavanaugh asked when they left the restaurant.

Bartel shook his head. "Not for a while. I want to see a man first."

A frown came into Cavanaugh's face. "You handled Vic Alcott pretty well," he said slowly. "And you got by with the meeting of the miners tonight. How you'll put it across tomorrow I don't know but some of those boys don't feel very happy about things. They get roaring drunk pretty early. I wouldn't hang around the streets and invite trouble if I were you."

"In this situation," Bartel answered, "I don't have to invite trouble."

"But you don't have to go hunting for it."

"If the job demands it I do."

"Who do you have to see?"

Bartel grinned. "You've helped me plenty. Thanks, Cavanaugh. See you tomorrow."

He turned and started down the street. Cavanaugh hesitated for a moment, then followed him. . . .

The Ludlow jail, housing the marshal's office, was between two saloons and across from another. It was a low, flat building. The jail was a single room in the rear. Marshal Pete Alcott had been appointed, according to the information Bartel had, by a citizen's committee. What actual authority he had was questionable. What he did was probably questionable. As Bartel understood it, Pete Alcott supported Tanner whenever Tanner needed help. If a miner complained that the games in one of Tanner's saloons were crooked and started trouble, Pete Alcott threw him in jail until he cooled off. If a man was held up and robbed Pete Alcott listened to the complaint and said he would see what he could do. That apparently ended the matter.

There was a light in the marshal's office and Bartel moved on to the door, opened it and stepped inside. A man was sitting at the desk in the room, playing solitaire. He looked up as Bartel came in and probably guessed who Bartel was for he placed his cards aside and his body seemed to grow alert.

"Are you the marshal?" Bartel asked.

Pete Alcott nodded. "That's right."

"I want a man arrested or some money recovered. Perhaps I want both."

"What's your name?"

"Bartel. James Bartel."

"Who do you want arrested?"

"Vic Alcott."

The marshal jerked to his feet. "You want what?"

"I want Vic Alcott arrested. He drew five thousand dollars from the Consolidated account after he was fired. I want the five thousand dollars back."

"Why you damned—"

"Do I get it?" Bartel interrupted.

"You get out of here and you get out damned fast or you'll get thrown into jail. That's what you'll get."

Bartel shook his head. "I came to you as the marshal. If you refuse to act I shall have to handle this myself and I promise you this. You'll not be marshal long if you run your office this way."

Pete Alcott clawed up his gun. "Come over here," he ordered. "That's what you get. Jail."

Bartel didn't move. He said, "Tanner wouldn't like it this way. Neither would your brother. The proper way to shoot me would be from some dark corner. Then you could say it was some miner who held a grudge and you could hunt for him forever. If I got shot here there might be too much of an investigation."

"Damn you, come over here!"

Bartel shook his head. He turned to the door. "I'll look up Vic Alcott myself," he said over his shoulder.

He didn't sound concerned about the gun in the marshal's hand but the muscles in his back were tensed as he stepped through the door and when he was outside and lifted his hand to his face it came away wet with perspiration.

CAVANAUGH would have thought this foolish, he knew—foolish and unnecessary. But it hadn't been. He had appealed to the lawman for help and had been refused. That refusal had pushed the marshal openly to the other side, where he had been anyhow. It had given him a greater freedom to act on his own without appeal to crooked law.

Bartel moved on up the street. It was thronged with men but few paid attention to him. The miners who had been in the yard that afternoon might have recognized him if they had looked at him closely, but not many of them did. The saloons and gambling halls were crowded. Bartel visited several. He was looking for Vic Alcott, but not looking too hard. If he saw Alcott he meant to go after him for that money. If he didn't see him tonight there would be time tomorrow. He didn't think that Vic Alcott would be running away yet.

He dropped into a place far up the street called Wells Saloon and while he stood near the door looking over the crowd, a tall, bearded miner came up to him.

"You're the new super, aren't you?" said the miner.

Bartel nodded.

"You told us to appoint a miner's committee an' talk to you. Did you mean it?"

Again Bartel nodded.

"Two or three of us have been talkin' things over at a place down the street. Maybe we ought to see you at the office but we'd like to get some of your ideas tonight if you've got the time."

Bartel hesitated, an instinctive feeling warning him that it was too early for any of the men to have come to the point of really planning a meeting with him. They had heard what he meant to do, but most of the men would want to wait and see just how seriously he meant it. He had thought it would be tomorrow or the next day or even a week before there were any real talks. But he could have been wrong, and he knew it, and if some of the men really wanted to talk this over it was an opportunity he shouldn't miss.

"Where are these other men?" he demanded.

"Just three doors down the street, where Dad Anderson lives. He's the one that called us in. I think they're still there. I just left but they were still talking."

Bartel scowled, then turned abruptly toward the door. He said, "Come on. Let's go."

The place where the miner took him wasn't much more than a shack but a light showed around the edges of the curtained window and under the door.

"You'll like Dad Johnson," said the miner as he knocked on the door. "You'll like the other fellows, too."

Someone opened the door and they stepped inside and the minute he came into the room Bartel knew that he had made a mistake. There were five men here, six counting the miner who had brought him, and most of them looked as though they had been drinking. They came to their feet as Bartel entered, and there wasn't a smile on a single face. Bartel had an instant feeling that most of these men weren't miners at all, that they were men who hung around the gambling halls, Tanner's men, in all probability. Several of them wore guns.

Every sense in Bartel's body was alert. He managed a smile and nodded and his face didn't show the concern he was feeling. He heard the man who had brought him close the door and he knew, without turning his head, that the man was leaning against it.

The fellow across from him, a big, husky, wide-shouldered man, grinned. He said, "Here's your miners' committee, Bartel. We're gonna tell you what we think of your plan. We're gonna tell you in a way you'll understand."

CHAPTER FOUR

Samaritan's House

THERE was sudden movement behind him. Bartel side-stepped. The slashing barrel of a gun which had been aimed at his head missed and struck his shoulder. The man across the room was moving forward, the

others also closing in. Several had drawn their guns to use as clubs. Bartel lunged forward. He took a blow on the side of the face but connected solidly with the jaw of the man who had welcomed him here and that man staggered back to the wall and sagged against it, his eyes glazed.

Bartel whirled and threw his fists at another man. He had no chance at all against so many and he knew it. All he could hope for was to do as much damage as he could before they overwhelmed him. He caught one man full in the face and smashed his fists at another. A stinging blow to the head sent him to his knees. He saw a man's legs and grabbed them and pulled the man down. He got his hands on the man's gun and twisted it free.

A boot caught him in the ribs and the pain of that kick knifed through his body. He got to his feet and slashed out almost blindly with the gun. Something pounded him in the face and rocked him backwards and he went out like a light. He didn't even feel the smash on the head which knocked him unconscious.

* * *

"He's coming out of it," said a voice in his ear. "He's going to be all right."

There was a hammering pain in his head. He had been aware of this, it seemed, for a long time, but the voice reached through it and helped him to orient himself. He opened his eyes and the blurred head and shoulders of the man stooping over him turned out to be Ed Cavanaugh. There was a red welt high on Cavanaugh's cheek and one of his lips was puffed and cut.

"Take it easy, Bartel," Cavanaugh said. "Don't try to sit up."

Bartel sat up and at first he was so dizzy he had to close his eyes again. When he opened them he saw in addition to Cavanaugh the slender, straight figure of Christine Elstad. The girl's face showed no expression at all. She was looking at him, Bartel thought, as she might look at a blank wall. He glanced around the room. This wasn't the room where the fight had occurred. It was a nicer room, a home-like room. The furniture, though old, looked comfortable. There were pictures on the wall. He was on a couch, a sturdy couch which would have made a better bed than the one he had rented at Maloney's.

"I had a couple fellows carry you over here from across the street," Cavanaugh explained. "You looked like you needed a doctor and I knew the Elstads would take you in, no matter what they think of Consolidated."

He was saying this as though to defend himself against something Christine must have said while Bartel was still unconscious. He was looking at Christine as he talked.

A man came in from another room, a light haired man of about fifty, a man with a square, rugged looking face and the blue eyes of Christine. He said, "Better, huh? Let's hear you talk."

"You're Gurd Elstan," Bartel guessed.

"That's fine," said the man. "Maybe there's no concussion. That's a nasty cut on the back of your head."

Bartel lifted his hands to his head. A bandage covered the top of it. Under the bandage he could feel the throbbing of his pulse in the open wound. One of his eyes wasn't all the way open and he felt of it.

"We can't do much about that eye," Elstad grinned. "It's going to be a beauty."

"You got there while the fight was still going on?" Bartel asked Cavanaugh.

"Just at the end, with a couple men I picked up on the street. Men I knew. They were a little sore when they found out whom they were helping."

"From the marks on your face it looks like the fight went on for a while."

"It did," Cavanaugh nodded. "For a while. We're not the only ones in this town who are marked up. Why did you ever walk in there?"

"I thought I was going to meet some miners who wanted to talk things over with me."

"I heard about that offer of yours," Gurd Elstad said. "What's your proposition going to be?"

BARTEL shook his head, then wished that he hadn't moved it for the hammering pain started up harder again. He said, "I don't know, Elstad. We'll pay higher wages. High as I figure we can go. We'll have to if we stop the highgrading and keep it stopped."

"That's our mine you're operating," Christine said abruptly. "You know that, don't you?"

"I heard there was some lawsuit Consolidated was mixed up in. I don't know the details."

"Father discovered that mine. He filed the claim in his name and mine and hired men to work it for him. Consolidated moved in while my father and I were away. They had forged papers to prove they bought it from a man who bought it from my father. My father never sold it."

Gurd Elstad nodded. "That's true, Bartel, and I wouldn't feel so badly if I had a man to fight but to fight a corporation is like fighting a shadow. Consolidated is hard to hit."

Bartel had heard that the Elstads were trying to collect twice. He had been told none of the details of the transaction. He knew none of them now, yet he had a feeling that Elstad was telling the truth.

"Consolidated bought the mine," he said slowly. "I'm sure of that. Someone was paid and his title to the property was verified."

Christine shook her head. "I don't believe it. John Herndon has told me what kind of a

corporation you work for. Consolidated wouldn't pay out a nickel it didn't have to. Consolidated would rather move in and take what it wanted for nothing and hold it by force."

This wasn't the Consolidated Mining Company which Bartel knew. It wasn't Consolidated at all. Consolidated was a new firm, operating on a shoestring and in danger of going bankrupt. Practically all of the stock was owned by small investors, many of whom stood to lose their life savings if he couldn't handle things here. He tried to tell Christine this but he could see that she didn't believe him and he gave up. Gurd Elstad, however, had listened to him thoughtfully and asked him several questions after he had finished. They were questions Bartel couldn't answer. They had to do with the sale of the mine to Consolidated.

"Hey, it's late," Cavanaugh finally broke in. "We'd better get over to Maloney's."

Jim Bartel nodded. He stood up. His legs didn't feel very steady but he knew he could make it as far as he had to go. He thanked the Elstads and left and Cavanaugh went with him.

There were still a good many men on the street but Bartel's hat covered his head and he and Cavanaugh didn't attract undue attention. They reached Maloney's and stood outside for a while.

"You're through wandering tonight, aren't you?" Cavanaugh insisted.

Bartel grinned. He said, "Sure, Ed. I'm through. I'll be a good boy until morning. And I didn't thank you for what you did for me."

"You don't have to," Ed Cavanaugh answered. "I think I'm beginning to get the idea. A man's job, a good many times, is bigger than the contract reads."

"A man's job is as big as he makes it, Ed. It's as small as the size of his courage."

"What do we do tomorrow?"

"Nothing, unless we get some sleep. See you at eight."

"See you at eight," Ed Cavanaugh agreed.

Bartel turned and moved up to the door and stepped inside. A light was on in the front room and three men were waiting there, Carl Tanner, Pete Alcott and his brother Vic. Tanner was smoking a cigar. He looked wholly at ease. Vic Alcott was scowling and so was the marshal. It would have been hard to tell which one of them had the ugliest look.

This was almost the way it had been before. This was almost the way it had been when he had walked into what was supposed to be a meeting of miners. Almost, but with a very noticeable difference. There had been rough stuff in that other room. Here there was a menacing silence.

CHAPTER FIVE

"By God, Just Try to Buck Us. . . ."

"WE'VE been waiting a long time, Bartel," Tanner said finally. "Sit down. We want to have a talk with you."

Bartel took a chair. He looked over at the marshal. "Did you bring me the five thousand dollars?"

"What five thousand dollars?" Pete asked.

"The five thousand your brother drew from the Consolidated account after he was fired."

Tanner shook his head. "We'll talk about that five thousand later. You see, maybe Vic Alcott wasn't fired. Maybe it was a mistake. Or maybe, if something should happen to you, Bartel, he would have to take over again and run things."

"Consolidated has plenty of other men they could send in here."

"Have they?" Tanner asked smiling.

Bartel's eyes narrowed. He wondered how much Tanner knew of the affairs of the mining company. That last remark sounded as though he might know a good deal.

"That little trouble you had tonight was unfortunate," Tanner went on. "Unfortunate, but perhaps the normal thing to expect. We don't like changes around here, Bartel. We like things the way they are."

"I don't," Bartel said bluntly.

"But it might be wise to."

"No."

Tanner shrugged his shoulders. "We've been talking to lots of the miners tonight," Tanner went on. "It's only natural of them to come to us, for they know us. They figure things are going to go on just the same. They're going to go to work tomorrow just as they always did. They're coming up out of the mines like they always did. How are you going to keep them from going through the gate, Bartel. You could stand in the way of one man or maybe a dozen, but how are you going to stand in the way of a couple hundred?"

Jim Bartel managed a grin. "Are you worried about my hole card, Tanner?"

"Not at all. You don't have one. I just hate to see trouble. We could make a deal, Bartel."

"Not with me."

"Maybe I'd better say something, Tanner," Pete Alcott broke in. "As the marshal, I don't intend to have any riots in this town. If Bartel's going to start one I'll just have to lock him up. I aim to keep things in Ludlow peaceful."

Jim Bartel got to his feet. He scowled at the Alcott brothers and at Carl Tanner. He took a turn around the room. "This high-grading has got to be cut down," he said final-

ly. "Some of those men carry out so much ore they almost stagger under the weight of it."

"Sure it's got to be cut down," Tanner agreed. "It can be cut down a lot. We're reasonable men, Bartel."

"Let me sleep on it."

"You figure to think things over, huh?"

"Maybe."

Carl Tanner nodded and stood up. The two Alcott brothers got to their feet.

"You'll let us know in the morning?" Tanner asked.

"You'll know in the morning," Bartel promised. "And about that five thousand dollars—"

"Don't worry about that. Five thousand is only small change to what you might be able to make in this town."

Jim Bartel managed a weak grin. He didn't like to stall this way. He liked his cards out on the table where they could be read, he liked to call them for what they were, but sometimes that wasn't practical.

The three men started for the door and there, Vic Alcott who thus far hadn't said a word, turned and glanced over his shoulder. "Try to buck us, Bartel," he said thickly. "By God, just try it. I hope you do."

JIM BARTEL went back to his room. He lay down on the bed without undressing and he lay there for about an hour. His eyes were closed but he wasn't sleeping. He was right up against it, he knew. Tanner and his crowd and the marshal would back the miners. If the miners didn't run over him, Tanner's crowd would, or the local law would step in and arrest him on some faked charge and Alcott would be put back in at the mine. They couldn't get by with this for long but they didn't have to. In a few weeks Consolidated would be finished. Notes would be due which couldn't be met.

After the hour had passed Bartel got up and moved to the open window. There was no one watching it and it was an easy drop to the ground. He eased his body through the window, circled behind several buildings and came back to the street. There weren't so many men on the street, now, and Bartel waited in the shadows for a while and then crossed the street to the house where the Elstads lived. He knocked on the door and then knocked again and then a third time. Finally he heard Elstad's voice through the door, asking who was there.

"Bartel," he answered. "I want to know where Ed Cavanaugh lives. I'm sorry to bother you but I have to see him."

Elstad opened the door. He had on a nightshirt which came almost to the floor and he was holding a lamp in his hand. He said, "Come in, Bartel. What's happened?"

Bartel stepped inside. "Nothing."

"But something's going to happen," Elstad guessed. "I can see it in your eyes. What do you want of Cavanaugh?"

"I need a little help."

"In the middle of the night?"

"What I'm going to do has to be done in the middle of the night."

"So they didn't scare you off. You're going to buck them, huh? How do you figure to do it?"

"With a chain and a lock, Elstad," Bartel said slowly. "Some boards and some paint. With cables which won't run and tags which for a change will carry the right label. And with a wagon."

Elstad's eyes narrowed. He said, "Wait right here, Bartel. I'll be back."

He was fully clothed when he returned. "I'm going with you," he said gruffly. "It's my property that's involved, even if the courts don't agree. . . ."

They talked things over in low voices in Ed Cavanaugh's room, and Bartel put his cards on the table, even though he knew that Gurd Elstad had no reason to love the Consolidated Mining Company. He told them what he planned and why and what would have to be done before morning.

"I know a man with a wagon," Elstad said. "A man you can trust."

"How soon can you get him down to the Lockridge Freighting Company office?"

"In half an hour. If I can't get him I'll drive the wagon myself."

"I'll meet you there," Bartel promised. "I'll need a gun."

Cavanaugh opened a bureau drawer in his room. He took out a gun, checked it, and then handed it to Bartel and Bartel dropped it into his pocket.

"I'm going with you," Cavanaugh said.

"No, you're going straight to the mine. You've got the cables to take care of and it might be a long job. We'll get there as soon as we can. Is there paint at the mine?"

"Plenty of it."

"And a chain and a lock?"

Cavanaugh nodded.

"You'll have the freight gate open for us?"

"In plenty of time."

Jim Bartel turned to the door and then looked around at Gurd Elstad and Ed Cavanaugh. "Maybe you're foolish for playing along with me on this," he said slowly, "but I can promise you an interesting time. I'm afraid that's about all."

Ed Cavanaugh grinned. "Who could ask for more than that? Let's get started. . . ."

The three guards at the Lockridge Freighting Company offices sat around a table playing stud. This was a boring job. The hours were long and uneventful. Their only satisfaction came in knowing that after a couple days

someone else would take their place. Tanner, who owned the Lockridge Freighting Company, kept shifting his men around.

In the back room were sacks of high grade ore. The sacks were labeled as the property of the Lodestar Mine. Carl Tanner was the owner of the Lodestar mine and there was really a Lodestar mine but the sacked ore they were guarding hadn't come from the Lodestar. It had come from the Consolidated mine by way of the back room of the California Bar. When enough for a load was collected, a well guarded wagon supposedly operated by the Lockridge Freighting Company, started on its way to the railhead to the south. There was almost enough for a load now.

The guards knew where the ore had come from and how and so did almost everyone else in Ludlow.

It was past midnight, now, and the stud game was lagging. One of the guards turned over his cards and stood up. "To hell with it," he growled. "I'm gonna get some sleep. I'm gonna—"

He broke off, stiffening, his eyes rivetted on the open side window. A man's head and shoulders were framed there and a gun extending over the window sill covered him. The guard lifted his hands shoulder high. The two other guards jerked around, then stood up and lifted their hands. They stared wide-eyed at the man looking through the open window.

"That's right," Bartel nodded, "only get your hands higher, way up in the air."

The guards lifted their hands higher. One of them moistened his lips. He was thinking that Tanner wasn't going to like this.

Jim Bartel climbed through the window a little awkwardly but careful to keep the three men covered with his gun. When he was inside he ordered them to lower their hands, one at a time, and unbuckle and drop their gunbelts. His voice was crisp, sharp. He sounded as though he meant what he said. The guards obeyed the order.

"Unlock the front door, now," Bartel told them, "and start carrying the sacks from the back room to the wagon outside."

"You'll never get away with this," one of the guards said suddenly. "You won't get twenty miles with that wagon before Tanner catches up with you."

Bartel shrugged. "Suppose you let me worry about that. Start lugging out the sacks."

The men went to work. The wagon was drawn up at the side of the building and there was no one in it. The street, at this far end of town and this late at night, was deserted. Bartel drove the men fast. The loading didn't take long.

When it was finished Bartel made one man tie the legs and arms of the two others and then he, himself, tied up the third and checked the job the first man had done. While this was going on, the wagon drove away, heading south.

Bartel stared down at the three guards. "If you can work free," he suggested, "maybe you ought to get out of town. Carl Tanner isn't going to listen to any excuses. I've a notion he can be a pretty hard man."

"You'll find out," one of the men said.

Jim Bartel grinned and moved to the door. He stepped outside and closed it.

CHAPTER SIX

No Work—No Whiskey

THE men climbing the stairs to the Consolidated mine the next morning found the gate locked and chained and a huge sign hanging over it which read: CLOSED. There was a handwritten statement on a piece of paper which was tacked to the sign. This statement read:

> The Consolidated mine will not be reopened until an agreement has been reached between the management and a miner's committee.
>
> I shall be glad to meet with such a committee tomorrow morning at ten o'clock at the Ludlow bank.
>
> James Bartel, Superintendent,
> Consolidated Mining Company.

The men read the sign and the statement and some of them turned back. Others, however, scaled the fence and one man from the top of it, shouted, "To hell with the management. Let's go to work. We can run this place ourselves."

More men climbed the fence and gathered around the shaft but the engine which ran the lift couldn't be started and the cables were missing. A man climbed down the shaft and came back to report that the cables had been dropped below. "All we've got to do," he said, "is get them up here and string 'em again."

That was all but it would be quite a job and the men there knew it.

Only one bit of work went on at the mine that morning. The freighting company which hauled the Consolidated ore to the railhead finished emptying the Consolidated loading racks. Only one wagon was needed and it soon drove off.

The men hanging around the yard grumbled a good deal and gradually moved down to Ludlow and to the bars. They told each other that there was nothing to worry about. The Consolidated couldn't make money without them. The mine would have to be reopened....

At ten o'clock the robbery of the Lockridge Freighting Company was discovered and the guards were definite in their identification of

the man responsible. They described Bartel so clearly that there could be no question as to the man they meant. Pete Alcott hurriedly threw together a posse, composed mainly of Tanner's men, and set off in pursuit of the wagon load of ore. The miners, figuring the time and distance involved, were sure that Alcott would reach the wagon before it could discharge its load, and strangely enough, they were disappointed in this. They knew where the ore had come from. A good many of them chuckled over the fact that Bartel had taken it back and wished that he might get away with it. They had no real love for Tanner, these men who worked for Consolidated. They knew that Tanner paid them only partial value for the ore and that he robbed them in his gambling halls. They would have liked to have seen Tanner lose out.

Tanner had little to say to anyone. Several of his men roved the town with orders to find Bartel and report where he was. Two men visited Maloney's but Bartel wasn't there. They kept a watch on the place. Two others visited the place where Cavanaugh lived but Cavanaugh wasn't home either. Tanner's men even tried Gurd Elstad, for they knew Bartel had been carried there after the fight the night before. They agreed with Elstad, however, that it would be foolish to think that he would give shelter to a man from Consolidated.

In the afternoon, Tanner visited John Herndon and they were together for half an hour. But perhaps this wasn't strange for Tanner was a heavy depositor in Herndon's bank. But Vic Alcott was in on that conference, too, and that was at least a little strange.

The posse came back late at night and dead tired. They hadn't located the missing wagon or the gold ore. Pete Alcott stalked back and forth across Tanner's office, telling what he was going to do to Bartel as soon as he found him. It was quiet in town that night. Men didn't have as much money to spend as usual. A few even asked for credit at the bars and when they were refused got ugly about it. There were quite a few fights.

In the Elstad's kitchen, Jim Bartel, Ed Cavanaugh and Gurd Elstad had a late cup of coffee and a slice of Christine's cake. Christine served the men in a stubborn and disapproving silence. She couldn't understand her father's acceptance of anyone from Consolidated. She was confused and bewildered and angry and a little afraid. A little afraid of what might happen to her father if these men were found here.

"The marshal will be at that meeting tomorrow morning to arrest you," Cavanaugh said abruptly.

Bartel shrugged his shoulders. "Probably."

"You couldn't do much from jail."

"I'm not in jail yet."

Cavanaugh looked worried and even Gurd Elstad frowned.

Christine broke her long silence. "Why did you call the meeting at the bank?"

"Why not?" Bartel asked. "John Herndon is a very interested party. If Consolidated stays closed down, he will take it over in less than a month."

"You said that the other night but I don't believe it."

"Ask him."

Christine shook her head. She poured herself a cup of coffee but didn't sit down at the table. "At least if he did take it over," she said slowly, "we would have a friend to deal with."

"Do you really think so, Chris?" her father asked.

"Of course I do."

"I've always thought Consolidated stole the mine," Gurd Elstad said. "But it could have been worked another way. Someone could have faked the papers and sold to Consolidated, someone with good connections in the recorder's office in the capital. Herndon's son-in-law works there. He was here in Ludlow not long ago with a roll of bills too big to get in his pocket. He never earned that much money honestly. He never won it gambling. The games here are too crooked for that."

"That's unfair of you, father," Christine said sharply.

Gurd Elstad shrugged and was silent and Jim Bartel got to his feet. He said, "Time for me to turn in, folks. See you in the morning."

Bartel and Cavanaugh were to sleep in the parlor, Cavanaugh on the couch and Bartel on a mattress on the floor. Bartel was asleep almost at once but Cavanaugh stayed awake for a long time, wondering about tomorrow. He couldn't understand how Bartel could sleep at all.

THERE was a crowd in front of the bank by nine thirty the next morning, a curious crowd. Men were betting whether or not Bartel would show up. There were some who said that if he had managed to get away with Tanner's high grade ore he would be a fool to come back. By this time, the value of that ore had taken on fabulous proportions.

The crowd increased in size as it neared ten o'clock and a little before that time Pete Alcott showed up with several deputies. These men pushed their way through the crowd to the bank and went inside. The bank was jammed, too. John Herndon had tried to clear the men out but had given up. He asked Alcott to clear the room.

"Everyone out of here," Alcott ordered. "There's not going to be any meeting. If Bartel shows up he's going to be arrested. Everyone out."

No one left or made any motion to leave and Alcott reached for his gun, then thought better of it. He could see by the expressions on the faces of these men that they didn't intend to get out, no matter what he did.

"All right, then, stick around," he agreed. "I'm making you all deputies in case of any trouble."

There were a few who laughed at this. None of the men took Alcott's statement seriously.

Jim Bartel had guessed there would be a good deal of speculation as to whether or not he would show up and he knew the value of good timing. At two minutes before ten he stepped out on the main street and by ten o'clock he was moving through an opening which the men made for him in the crowd. Word that he had shown up passed from lip to lip. Here and there money which had been wagered on his probable appearance, changed hands. Several men shouted questions at him, questions about what had happened to a lot of highgrade ore. They were good-natured questions. These men didn't mind seeing Tanner get the worst of it for a change.

Bartel made no answer to any of the questions. He didn't smile at anyone. He didn't seem to glance at anyone. He just walked straight ahead toward the bank, his face as impassive as a gambler's. He reached the door of the bank and pushed inside and here again a path opened for him and at the far end of it stood Pete Alcott and the deputies who had come with him, three of Tanner's men.

"You're under arrest, Bartel," Alcott said sharply.

Bartel stopped, several paces from the man. "Under arrest for what?"

"Under arrest for robbing the Lockridge Freighting office?"

"I didn't rob the Lockridge Freighting office. All I did was move some gold ore to another place, ore from the Consolidated company's mine."

"That ore was from the Lodestar mine."

Bartel shook his head. "Who are you trying to fool, Alcott? The Lodestar isn't being worked, and you know it. That ore came from the Consolidated through the back room of the California Bar."

"It belonged to Carl Tanner."

"Has he got a bill of sale from Consolidated for it?"

Some of the men in the bank were grinning. Pete Alcott looked desperate. This talk wasn't getting him any place. He took a step forward. "You can tell all that to the judge. I said you were under arrest."

Bartel frowned. "I came here to talk to these men about re-opening the Consolidated mine. You mean I can't talk to them?"

"No, by God. You're coming with me." Alcott had his gun out now and was covering Bartel with it. He said, "Turn around and march to the door."

"Just a minute, Alcott," called one of the miners. "You told us we were all deputies, an' for one, I want to hear what Bartel's got to say."

"I do too," called another man.

Others chimed in. "Let him talk." "Let's hear his proposition." "That was Consolidated ore he took and you know it. You can't arrest him." "We want to hear what he's got to say."

"It looks like you're out-voted, marshal," Bartel said quietly.

The men had closed in around them. There was so passage now to the door. Pete Alcott bit his lips. He nodded his head. "All right, talk. But get it over. You're still under arrest."

BARTEL pushed past the marshal to the counter. Back of it he saw Christine Elstad and two other clerks. Christine was looking at him thoughtfully. In the open door of Herndon's office was Herndon, Carl Tanner and Vic Alcott, ready, probably, to make a proposition to these men after he had been disposed of. Bartel got up on the counter and sat there, facing the men in the room. This lifted him high enough so he could see all of them and so every man there could see him. The room grew quiet.

"What's your proposition, Bartel?" called a voice.

"Why, it's quite simple," Bartel answered. "You men appoint a committee to meet with me and talk over the matter of wages and hours and a bonus on the grade of ore you find. When we have agreed on that the mine will be re-opened and you go back to work. You carry no more ore through the gate to sell to Tanner at the California Bar."

"To hell with that," someone shouted. "We wouldn't make enough to live on."

"You mean you wouldn't make enough for Tanner to live on," Bartel answered. "What happens to the extra money you get now? Who are you highgrading for? Tanner doesn't give you half of what the ore you sell him is worth. His crooked gambling games and high bar prices take up the rest."

"That's a lie, Bartel," Tanner shouted.

"Ask these men," Bartel called back. "Ask them how many have won as much as they've lost in your games. The games you run are as crooked as you are."

Tanner stepped out of the doorway in which he had been standing. "No man can say that to me, Bartel."

"I said it to you," Bartel snapped. He faced the miners again, ignoring Tanner. "Send some men down to the California Bar,

right now," he suggested. "Pick up the cards and examine them closely. See if they're not marked. Corner the house men and see how many are wearing sleeve hold-outs. Take the roulette wheels apart and see how they work. Prove it to yourselves that the man is crooked. Prove—"

Bartel heard some man's shout of warning. He twisted sideways and heard the blast of a shot and felt the scrape of a bullet tear across his chest, a bullet which would have plowed into his shoulder if he hadn't turned. He boosted himself off of the counter and ducked below it before Tanner could fire again. All the men around him had ducked down. Those in the back were pressing toward the doors. The windows crashed outward at the surge of the crowd. Pete Alcott jerked up his gun but before he could use it a bearded man twisted it out of his hand and a fight started there in the middle of the room between Alcott and the three deputies who had come with him and the miners around them.

There was no one close to the counter. Bartel, still stooping down, moved along it to the far end. He risked a look over the counter. Tanner and Vic Alcott were gone. Herndon wasn't in sight.

"Get down to the California Bar," Bartel shouted. "Prove to yourself what you've been up against."

He turned and hurried for the street and started for the California Bar. The entire crowd was moving slowly, sullenly, ponderously that way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Powdersmoke Requiem

SEVERAL shots blasted from the doorway of the California Bar and the crowd stopped and then scattered, backing up or ducking into or between other buildings. Several more shots ripped up the street and most of the rest of the crowd took cover. Ed Cavanaugh joined Bartel at the side of a store building. Cavanaugh had been in the bank and heard all that happened.

"We'll never be able to prove a thing, now," he said to Bartel. "Tanner's men got there first."

"We don't have to prove anything now," Bartel answered. "Any time a man loses at cards he's ready to believe he was cheated. Plenty of the miners have lost."

"Tanner's games weren't as crooked as you made them sound. He ran them pretty straight when he had a house man he could trust. He was careful. If a houseman of his got into too many rows with fellows who lost, Tanner got rid of him."

"Did he run his games straight, Ed?"

"Not all of them."

"Then what I said was true. A bank robber who holds up a few banks but not all the banks in the country, is still a dirty damned bank robber."

Cavanaugh grinned. "You have the damnedest way of proving your point. All right, so Tanner's crooked. What do we do?"

"Wait here," Bartel said. "I'll be right back."

He circled behind the store building and moved on toward the California Bar. He didn't mean to come back and he hadn't wanted to ask Ed Cavanaugh to chance what he was going to do. From the minute he had arrived here it had been clear that Consolidated could never operate until Tanner was out of the picture, Tanner and his entire crowd. The man had to be smashed and this was the time to do it. For once, and perhaps only for a while, Tanner didn't have the upper hand, didn't have more than his own crowd behind him.

Bartel still had the gun he had borrowed from Cavanaugh and he checked it now as he neared the back entrance to the California Bar. Several miners who had ducked back between two buildings close to the California Bar, recognized him and joined him.

"You're not thinking of going in there, are you?" one of them asked.

Bartel nodded. "Why not?"

"Tanner's whole crowd is in there. Pete Alcott, too. He just came to the front door a moment ago and ordered everyone to go home. He said the bar was closed, he said we could pick a dozen men and come in and make any kind of an examination we wanted to." The miner grinned. "He offered five hundred dollars to the man who brought you in."

"Want to earn it?" Bartel asked.

The miner shook his head slowly. "I reckon not."

Alcott was out on the street again, shouting something. Bartel could hear the marshal's voice. He turned between the two buildings toward the street and at the front edge of the building, stopped. Alcott was again inviting the men to come ahead.

"Bartel was lying," he shouted. "Come and see for yourselves."

Carl Tanner was standing at the marshal's side, a new cigar in his mouth. He took it out and added, "Sure, come on. The drinks are on the house." Then he put the cigar back between his lips.

He was standing so that Bartel had a side view of the man and Bartel lifted his gun. He said to the miners, "Watch," and sighted along the barrel and squeezed the trigger. The cigar disappeared from Tanner's mouth and the man stepped back, startled. Jim Bartel grinned. He moved out into the street. He was

close to the men in front of the California, close enough so that that shot had been easy.

"Am I invited, too, Tanner?" he called. "Does that go for me?"

His gun was hanging from his hand and he stood there quietly, watching Tanner and Alcott and the two men in the doorway behind them. Alcott had stiffened and was staring at him, wide eyed. Tanner lifted a hand to his throat. Tanner's body was rigid, too. One of the men in the doorway backed out of sight. The other man stood there. He started to raise his gun, then changed his mind and lowered it, possibly waiting for Alcott or Tanner to start something.

Bartel started forward, his gun still swinging in his hand. Back up the street a voice, Ed Cavanaugh's voice, called out, "Hey, Bartel. Wait for me." And Cavanaugh started running to catch up.

Bartel didn't take his eyes off of the two men in front of the saloon doorway. He took another step forward and another and he saw Alcott claw suddenly for his gun and whip it up and he heard the crack of the gun's explosion. He swung his own gun up, then, and fired it and Alcott screamed and grabbed at his shoulder, twisting half around, twisting in front of Tanner and between Tanner and Bartel.

Behind the partial shield of Alcott's body, Tanner moved. His gun came out and he threw a shot at Bartel and Bartel felt the sting of a bullet in his upper arm. He tried to steady his gun but he couldn't. He switched it to his other hand. The man in the doorway snapped a shot at him and behind him another gun went off and the man in the doorway jerked back out of sight.

Alcott grabbed at Tanner for support and Tanner held the man, held Alcott in front of him. Tanner fired again at Bartel but the sagging weight of the marshal's body disturbed his aim. Bartel's leveled gun exploded and Tanner's arms dropped and Alcott, still clinging to him, fell with him to the ground.

Ed Cavanaugh, who had shot the man in the doorway, pushed past Bartel. He turned and shouted, "Come on, fellows. Let's clean up inside."

Others passed Bartel and jammed through the saloon door. There was more shooting inside the saloon and then the sound of smashing furniture. A few of Tanner's men scurried out the back way and found places to stay hidden until night. Under the cover of darkness those men were to leave Ludlow forever. Carl Tanner's reign was over and they knew it and there was no place for them here now.

JIM BARTEL looked down at Tanner's body and at the groaning figure of the marshal. He told someone to get a doctor but he knew a doctor wouldn't be of much help. Across the street was a restaurant with a porch in front of it and some steps. Bartel moved that way. He sat down on the steps and rather awkwardly took off his coat. Tanner's first bullet had gone through the flesh of his upper arm. The wound was bloody and painful but not very serious.

Ed Cavanaugh found him there and brought the doctor over to dress his wound and while the doctor worked on him a crowd of miners gathered around them.

"Get your committee appointed," Bartel said. "I want to get things settled and get the mine running again."

"We're the committee," answered one of the miners, "but I don't suppose you feel like talkin' right now."

"Why not?" Bartel asked. "I don't need this arm to talk."

There in the street with the doctor still working on his arm and the committee surrounding him and with other miners looking on and listening, the conference was started. A wage increase was settled on, a bonus scale was established and a way of measuring it. The doctor finished his work and stood back, and the conference continued.

Then suddenly there was an interruption and the men turned and looked up the street. Gurd Elstad was marching down it, almost dragging the battered and scarcely recognizable figure of John Herndon, the banker. He came up to where Bartel was sitting and shoved Herndon to the ground. The banker was a sad sight.

"Here he is, Bartel," Elstad said grimly. "Here's the man who faked the papers on the Consolidated mine and pocketed the money paid him for it. Then he loaned part of the money back and made a deal with Tanner to see that the Consolidated went broke so he could get his hands on it again. I pounded the whole story out of him. I want you to hear it."

Herndon was nodding. He was a completely broken man. He mumbled his confession and Elstad dragged him off to lock him up until a few of the men could get together and choose another marshal to take over the policing of the town. . . .

The trouble was mostly over. By mid-afternoon the miners' committee hunted up Bartel at Maloney's and told him they were ready to go back to work. And by that time, Ed Cavanaugh was already at the mine, hauling up the lift cables. He had told Bartel he could get the job finished before dark. That meant that the mine could open operations again tomorrow.

"Will you tell us something?" asked one of the miners. "What happened to the gold ore you snatched back from Tanner. The posse

said the wagon had disappeared. Where did it disappear?"

"The gold ore went back into the Consolidated loading racks the night we took it," Bartel told them. "It was loaded into our own freight wagons the next morning with half the town looking on. The wagon never left Ludlow."

This brought a laugh from a good many of them. It was a story which would be told over and over again and which would improve with each telling as the men added imaginary details.

Still later that afternoon, Gurd Elstad came by. "You're comin' to our house to eat tonight," he said to Bartel. "Those are Christine's orders, not mine. I think she's decided she likes the Consolidated Mining Company. Or maybe she just wants to show you how well she can cook. But you sure as hell better come along."

Elstad was grinning and there was no reason in the world for it but Bartel knew that a flush of color had come into his face. He scowled and hoped that the scowl would hide it. "What about Vic Alcott?" he asked.

"Didn't you hear?" said Elstad. "Why he was one of the two men who got in the way of bullets just inside the saloon door after your fight with Tanner and his brother was over."

BARTEL didn't know this but he had known there could be no other ending for either of the Alcott brothers. They had played down the line with Tanner and had lost. Jim Bartel leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He could get to work now, really get to work. They could get out the ore and get it to the railroad. They could raise the money necessary to meet the loans the Consolidated had made and if they were a little late whoever took over the administration of Herndon's affairs might not press them. Elstad would get his proper payment through the courts.

There was a lot to do. Ludlow needed a decent administration and a general cleaning up. Better mining equipment was necessary. There ought to be a school here and a church and good restaurants. Prices were too high but would come down once easy money was eliminated and the end of excessive highgrading would help out in that. Yes, there was a lot to do. He could really go to work.

"Hey," Elstad was asking. "Are you coming to dinner at our house."

"Surely," Bartel agreed. "There's a question I want to ask Christine."

"As soon as this?" Elstad gasped, scratching his chin.

Bartel colored again and shook his head. "I want to ask her if she can teach a school if we get a school started. What do you think? Will she do it?"

"She might."

Bartel nodded and stood up. He scowled at Gurd Elstad. "Maybe later on," he said slowly, "I'll want to ask her something else. And don't grin at me, Elstad. This is all the warning you get."

Gurd Elstad went right on grinning. "Come on," he said, "or we'll be late. Christine wouldn't like that. Christine sure wouldn't like that at all."

THE END

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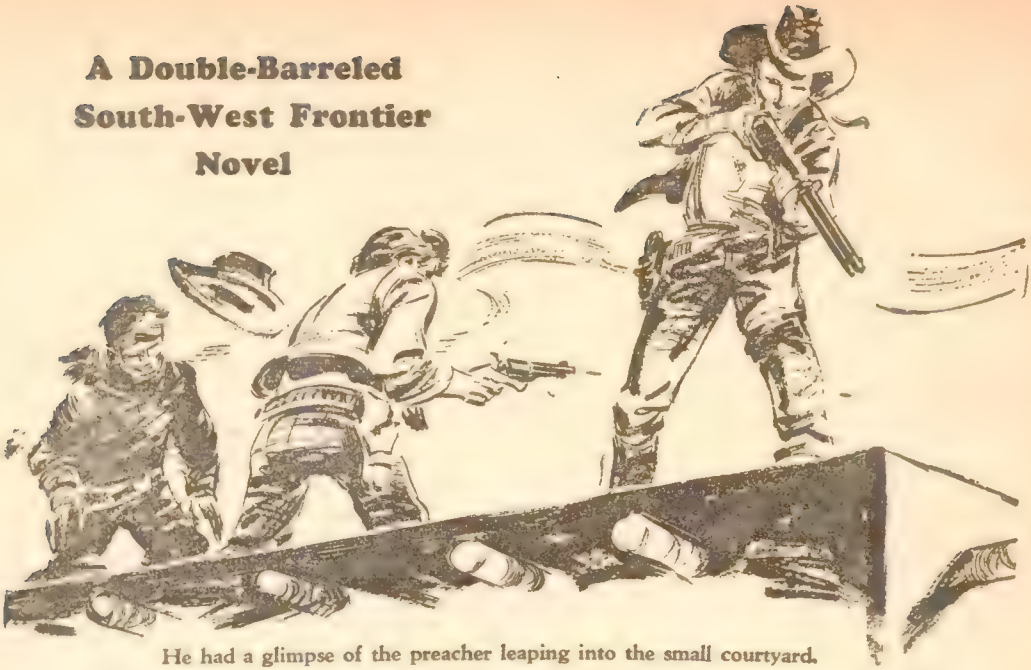


He had a glimpse of the preacher leaping into the small courtyard.

THE PARSON OF MASSACRE RANCHO

CHAPTER ONE

Tough Trail

THE trail herd Gavin Wallace was to drive out of the green hills of central Texas was strung out over a grassy meadow, ready to start the long journey to New Mexico Territory.

Oldish Wig Prouty, the cook, was up on the wagon loaded with bed rolls and supplies. He shook his head. "You'll never find as good cow pasture as this you're leavin', Gave. What the hell's New Mexico got that Texas ain't? Besides Apaches?"

"It hasn't got one thing that Texas has," said Wallace grimly. "Preachers. There'll be none of that tribe over there; too many Apaches. And New Mexico's got a valley I saw on that drive I just made with Goodnight. A valley bigger than this whole county where I aim to build my ranch. A range with a big adobe building I've arranged to buy for headquarters—a place called Spanish Plaza. That's where I wanted to take my folks. . . ."

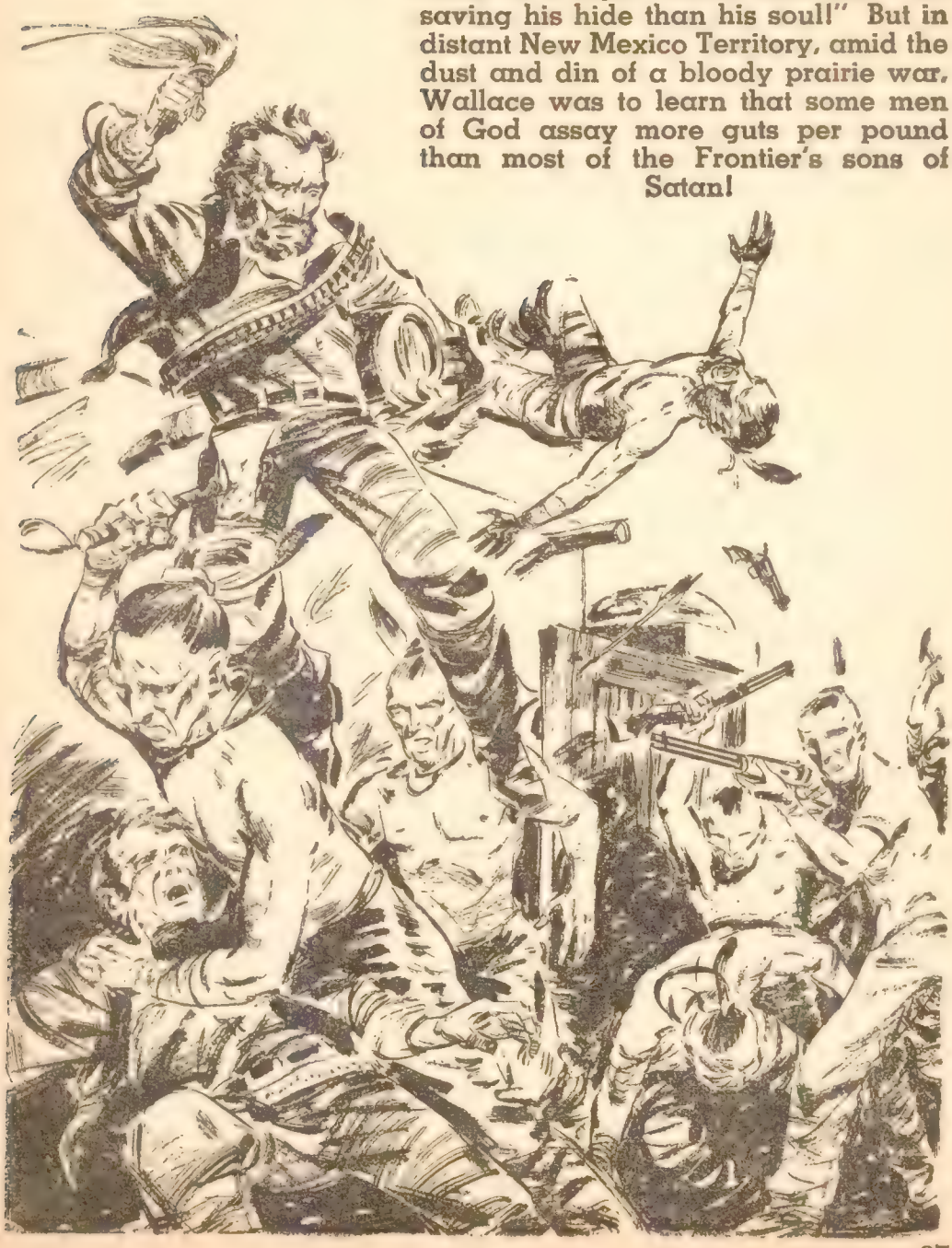
His voice trailed off. Gavin Wallace, sitting his big black gelding, looked back at the ruins of the cabin that had been his home. Back of the burned house were the new graves of his mother, his father, his young brother and sister—all slaughtered by Comanches a short week before. Wallace was twenty-five, a broad-shouldered granite-hard six-footer who had been in the Rangers and on a half dozen long trail drives, but tears welled in his gray eyes now, and his hands clenched the big saddlehorn savagely. He had been away when the raid occurred. If he'd arrived home a few hours sooner from New Mexico, he'd have been there to help defend the house and either he'd be lying in a grave with his folks or they'd all be alive.

Old Wig Prouty, whose nickname came from an untidy woolly covering he wore over his bald head, flicked the leader of the four-horse team with his whip. "No use lookin' back, Gave," he said. "You done all you could—chasin' down and butcherin' the red lice that massacred 'em. And you give 'em a Christian burial."

The skin stretched tighter over Wallace's high cheekbones. He had averaged less than three hours' sleep since he had come home to lead a party of avengers on the Comanche trail. Twenty hours later they had caught up with the raiders and wiped them out to the

By Ray Nafziger

"I never knowed ary preacher yet," Gavin Wallace said, "that when it come to a tight, didn't care more for saving his hide than his soul!" But in distant New Mexico Territory, amid the dust and din of a bloody prairie war, Wallace was to learn that some men of God assay more guts per pound than most of the Frontier's sons of Satan!



last warrior. Riding back, he had returned just in time to stop a preacher, Everett Pooler, a tobacco-chewing sky pilot, from preaching the sermon over his family. Preacher Pooler, Wallace had learned, had seen the red raiders several miles from the Wallace cabin. He could have ridden to warn the Wallaces; instead he had cowered in the brush, afraid to risk running into the Comanches. Wig was thinking of that preacher now.

"Damn a preacher like that hound," he said. "I never knowed ary preacher yet what when it come to a tight didn't care more for saving his hide than his soul."

After the funeral Gavin had sold the Wallace ranch, trading the Wallace cows and calves for heifers, dry cows and bulls that could stand the tough trail to New Mexico Territory. Immediately a cattle dealer, Jay Milner, had arranged to throw in a thousand head of steers on the drive, hiring enough men to work the extra cattle. Milner was going to New Mexico in advance to handle the sale of his steers.

Gavin gave one final look at the cabin. Wig was right; no use in looking back. Life rolled on like the wheel of a wagon; the spokes turned until they brought you to the place where you had come in and you died.

He lifted a long yell and jogged to the head of the long line of cattle. Wig cracked the whip over his team. The long drive through half of Texas and a corner of New Mexico began to move.

GAVIN WALLACE had been on two steer drives with Charles Goodnight, pioneer of trailing cattle west out of Texas by the head of the Concho and the Horsehead crossing on the Pecos. That route, often beset by raiding Indians, cursed by nearly a hundred miles of desert without water or grazing made trailing a herd north into Kansas seem a picnic in comparison.

The men Milner had hired as his share of the crew were a poor lot. Yet the cattle—Wallace's and Milner's both—were all strong animals in good flesh. Luck was with them on the trail, for they saw no Indians and there was even drinkable water from recent rains on the stretch of desert hell. By a miracle it was an easy drive to the Horsehead on the Pecos, where they watered the thirsty herd and trailed up the east bank of the river until they came to the ford opposite Devlin's Store. The river that rolled from the north was in flood, a dirty, treacherous torrent.

"The sensible thing, of course," Wig Prouty muttered to himself, "would be to wait until yon river went down. But of course it ain't what the boss will do."

Wallace galloped up. "Can you get your wagon across?" he asked.

"Easy," said Wig sarcastically. "Easy as skinning a rabbit if you'll just git me a steamboat. If you can't get a steamboat, we'll cross anyway. My life ain't worth nothin', of course, but you'd lose four horses and a chuck wagon."

Wallace grinned. "We'll float your wagon over," he offered.

"What's your hurry?" protested Wig. "If that river don't go down in a few hours, it will inside a day or two."

Wallace shrugged. "Life's too short to waste waiting for a river to go down."

The oldish cook sighed and drenched tobacco juice over a wheel tire. "If you saw a greased slide to the hot place, Gave, you'd jump for it yellin' time is plumb too valuable to waste waitin' to die to go to hell."

Minus its wheels, the wagon was floated on cottonwood logs and hauled over with ropes. After the team and the remuda of saddle horses were swum across, Wig grumblingly put his wagon back together and hooked up to make way for the cattle. Wallace pointed the herd into the stream and the leaders were half way across when the horse of a rider down-stream from Wallace quit swimming and turned on his side to float. Wallace rode down to throw a lariat to the unlucky rider and drag him ashore. Meanwhile, in mid-current the cattle, after going into a helpless mill, turned back to the east bank again. Furthermore, they stubbornly refused to take the water again.

Swearing heatedly, Wallace and his men cut out a small bunch of cows and shoved them into the river by main force. After they had crossed, the herd followed meekly to scatter out on the grassy river flats. A half mile distant sat Devlin's, a combined saloon and store, and adjoining it, three or four shacks of poles plastered over with mud.

As the last of the drags shambled up the banks, dripping streams of muddy water, Wig Prouty growled, "Well, there's anyway five hours, forty-nine minutes and thirty-seven seconds saved. What we goin' to do with all that time?"

The hands Milner had provided for the drive, led by young Duke Porter, had already decided what they would do with their spare time. To a man, leaving the cattle, they headed for the saloon. Wallace shrugged; he and his own men, Joe and Tom Fisher and three others, could watch the herd.

One of the Fishers yelled suddenly and pointed back toward the stream. In the river, headed toward the west bank, was a buckboard drawn by a team of sorrel ponies. The driver was a girl, her sunbonnet fallen back from a mass of mahogany-colored hair. Beside her sat a man with the beard the same color as the girl's hair.

The pony team was already beyond its depth and swimming. The man grabbed the reins from the girl and started to turn the team, then realizing it was too dangerous to turn in the swift current, urged the horses toward the west bank. In mid-stream the torrent rocked the buckboard as if it were a small boat, almost overturning it. The near-side horse, tangled in harness, suddenly began a frantic plunging.

Wallace, followed by the Fishers, hastily led the way into the river. The red-bearded driver, opening a pocket-knife, was climbing out, evidently to try to cut the horse free. Wallace shouted at him to stay in the rig and, sending his mount straight at the plunging sorrel, swept a long knife from a belt scabbard and sawed the frenzied animal loose. Meanwhile each of the Fisher brothers had fastened a rope to a front wheel and while Wallace helped keep the sorrels in a straight course, the Fisher cowhorses dragged the rig up the bank. During all this the girl sat calmly in the vehicle, without a single screech. When the buckboard stopped on dry land she and the red-bearded man clambered out.

The girl looked back at the river and then flashed a smile at her rescuers. "There's no way to thank all of you," she said simply. "I didn't realize the flood was so dangerous and seeing the cattle tracks lead into the river I just drove the team in. My father was asleep at the time."

The bearded man stretched out his hand to Wallace. "I want to add my thanks to my daughter's. McAllister's my name," he stated. "My daughter Vincie and I belong to a group of people that have settled at Spanish Plaza."

Wallace's eyes became stormy. "Spanish Plaza?" he repeated. "But the Mexican owning the place promised to sell it to me when I came back from Texas."

"He said nothing to me about that," said the red-bearded man. "We purchased it and are using the buildings as headquarters for a farm community. A group of us Easterners all pooled our resources and came out to establish ourselves in a new country."

Wallace silently swore at the drunken Mexican heir to the Plaza who had promised to hold the place for three months. The Plaza adobe buildings had been an ideal place for a ranch headquarters, commanding the lower end of Spanish Valley. He'd change his plans; start his ranch at the upper end of the same valley. No farm people, especially Easterners, would stay in that country. The first Apache outbreak would scare them away. Two short years before, a dozen Mexican families occupying the Plaza had been wiped out by an Apache band led by the notorious chief, Juan Jacinto.

"I hope you will not change your plan of ranching in the Spanish Valley," said McAllister. "There is plenty of room and we would like to have neighbors. We realize it is going to be a struggle for us, since we're tenderfeet with little money. I was a preacher in a poor little farm community when my congregation asked me to lead them to a better country. I'm afraid I'll make a poor Moses."

Gavin Wallace started. So this redhead was a preacher. Wallace turned abruptly to ride away. He had hoped to leave preachers behind him when he left Texas, but already one had wrecked his plan to take over the entire Spanish Valley. He'd gamble on one thing, however: no colony of people headed by a preacher would last long in this part of New Mexico Territory.

CHAPTER TWO

Spanish Valley

AFTER arranging guards to loose-herd the cattle on the flats, Gavin headed for the store. The owner of the steers in the herd, Jay Milner, had promised to meet Wallace at Devlin's and Wallace was impatient to get rid of the Milner cattle and push on to Spanish Valley.

Two horsemen came from the little settlement to lope toward him. One was Jay Milner. Brown-bearded, dressed in a neat homespun suit, his boots polished, he looked spruce in contrast with Wallace' long hair and dusty clothes. With Milner was a brown-faced Mexican youth of twenty or so, dressed in the gaudy garb worn below the Border. From his plate-sized saddlehorn hung a guitar in a case.

Milner greeted Gavin cordially. "You made a fast trip. I got here only this morning. Rode down from Santa Fe with this boy as a guide. This is Apache Martinez—he was a captive of the Apaches for many years and knows how to dodge them."

The boy chuckled. "You bet I dodge them. Chief Juan Jacinto kill my parents when I am only four years old. He take me to live with him but when I am thirteen, I get away." He made a grimace. "They don't make no Apache of me."

"The steers look fine," said Milner. "Lose many?"

"Three of yours," said Wallace.

"Only three?" Milner's roundish blue eyes popped wide open. "You're a cattle driver, Gavin. Goodnight couldn't have done better. I got a proposition for you. I figured to sell these steers to the army forts, but they're bought up just now. I got to keep 'em four months; by then I can sell 'em for top money. I hate to ask another favor, but surely you can drive them up to that Spanish Valley with

your herd and look after 'em four months."

"Can't do it," said Wallace. "I've got to get my ranch started. Your men can locate your steers for you somewhere."

Milner shook his head. "I couldn't trust them and anyway all but three are going home. Tried to hire men at Santa Fe but no one wants to take chances with the Apaches. If you'll watch after my cattle, Gave, I'll pay you a hundred a month. Three of my men will stay with you. You've simply got to do this for me, Gavin; after all your father and I were life-long friends. All the money I've got is in this herd."

"Who're your three that will stay?" Gavin asked, weakening.

"Porter and Bone and Torrey."

Wig Prouty who had come up to Wallace' side grunted. "Whoa up," he advised. "Those three's the worst of the lot—lazy, boozing no-goods. They ain't the kind to depend on in Apache country. Why don't you look after your own cattle, Milner, and take your chances with the Apaches?"

"I'm no rancher," said Milner hurriedly. "And I've got to spend my time arranging to sell the steers—may have to go over to Arizona, even. Gavin, can't you do it for me?"

Wallace nodded and Milner headed back to Santa Fe with Apache Martinez.

The three Milner riders who were to stay with Wallace showed up for work, sick from too much rotgut, cursing the hot sun that beat down on them. The youngest of the trio was the dandy called Duke Porter. The other two, Dad Bone and Alamo Torrey, were middle-aged men who taken together didn't make one middling-good hand.

The herd moved on with half its crew, the other men returning to Texas. With it now went two Mexican adobe workers Wallace had hired to build a camp shack.

The third day they trailed past the Spanish Plaza, a rectangle of adobe rooms built solidly around a small square or plaza. There were no windows in the outside walls and above the flat roof projected a three-foot continuation of the walls, loopholed for crouching riflemen. A strong looking little fort, although in Chief Juan Jacinto's attack it had turned into a horrible death trap for its people. Jacinto had killed everybody.

ABANDONED when Wallace had seen it last, the Plaza now showed a surprising change. The adobe walls had been repaired; the weed-grown fields had been plowed and planted, with their irrigation ditches again running water. Wallace had to admit that Preacher McAllister's colonists had worked hard.

He pointed the line of cattle to pass a quarter of a mile from the place, but a wagon came out carrying the red-bearded preacher and several other men.

"We're glad you've decided to be neighbors with us," McAllister greeted Wallace. "We've come to ask you and your men for supper tonight."

"We'll be miles away by then," stated Wallace.

"But you'll surely have time to ride back for a little neighborly visit," argued the minister. "We'd like to talk over the possibility that Apaches might visit the valley again. This is Juan Jacinto's old country and there's a report he's back from Old Mexico. We have a tight fort here, and we hope you men will join us if the Apaches start raiding."

"Reverend," said Wallace gruffly, "you better plan to defend yourself, and we'll do the same. We'll be too busy looking after our cattle to protect you people."

"I didn't intend for you to defend us," said McAllister. "I merely offered you the shelter of the Plaza. I feel indebted to you for pulling us from that river and I hoped that since we are alone in a strange country we would be good neighbors and friends."

Wallace' face was bleak. "Far as I'm concerned, Reverend, forget we pulled you out of the river. It was a mistake; I didn't know you were a preacher at the time."

McAllister looked searchingly at Wallace, and his blue eyes flashed anger. Then he turned to Duke Porter and several others of the men who had ridden up. "Men," he said, "we are holding religious services every Sunday morning at the Plaza. All of you are invited to attend."

"Thanks, Parson," said Dad Bone. "But on a cow ranch Sunday's like any other day."

"Not to me it ain't," spoke up Duke Porter. "Me, I could use a little religion. I'll sure be there for them services, Parson, bright and early."

McAllister smiled. "You will be welcome Sunday and any other day."

Duke Porter guffawed after the wagon drove away. "Welcome any day," he said. "Ain't that sweet—comin' from the pa of that red-headed filly we seen at Devlin's Store? Watch me drop my rope on her."

Anger rose in Gavin Wallace. Duke Porter wasn't fit to look at a girl like Vincie McAllister. Duke was a camp-fire Romeo; all along the trail from Texas he had bragged of his female conquests.

Wallace picked his headquarters site in the wide mouth of a canyon dropping from a precipitous mountain range to empty into the upper valley. The two Mexicans mixed water and clay and dead grass to throw up a long one-room adobe building with a dirt roof and a few holes for windows. It was a building

intended for a camp, not a fort. Wallace was not indifferent to the danger of Apaches, but he figured Wig, the two Fishers, Milner's three men and himself, all armed with repeating rifles, to be a match for any small band of Apaches.

After his cattle and Milner's steers had been located around water holes, small streams and springs, the work settled to a routine of keeping the cattle shoved back along the lines roughly enclosing his range. The country was all that Wallace had hoped: there was room for ten thousand cattle in the upper valley. The Spanish Plaza end would handle as many more.

Whenever he rode in sight of the Plaza, Wallace was filled with unreasoning hatred. He looked on the valley as his own; the settler farmers were intruders. He was hoping that after one Apache scare, the preacher's colony would head back east.

ONCE Wallace, chasing a horse that had decided to go back to his home range in Texas, topped out on a low ridge, overlooking the Plaza and stopped to watch the men breaking ground and cleaning old sand-filled irrigation canals. While he watched, a rider came up on the opposite side of the ridge. It was Vincie McAllister, riding side-saddle on a mettlesome bay. Identifying him, she started to ride back, then instead came toward him.

"The preacher-hater," she said sarcastically. "What did a preacher ever do to you, bite you?"

That brought a grin. "No, not that."

"It must have been something terrible, to turn you against all ministers. Of course it's none of my business, but what have you against Dad besides his being a preacher and the fact that we bought the Plaza?"

"Nothing," he admitted.

"But you don't care to be friends with him or any one at the Plaza?"

"I haven't anything against you folks at the Plaza," he told her," "except that I hate to see you spoiling good range land with your plows and irrigation ditches. You're not going to last here anyway. Easterners have no business in Apache country. You don't know how to fight."

"Don't we?" said the girl. "We'll see. And maybe we don't want you in the valley any more than you want us. You're running cattle over what could become good farm land to support hundreds of people. We'll stay here as long as you will. Longer."

She rode away, and Gavin Wallace grinned again. She had spunk, Vincie McAllister, besides being as pretty as some of these New Mexico Territory sunsets.

Every Saturday night Duke Porter left for a wild spree at the river settlement. On Sunday he visited at the colony, attending the religious services. Afterward in camp he laughed at the services and bragged how he had fooled the McAllisters, father and daughter.

"If you're such a master hand with women," said Wig sourly, after listening to Duke's boasts, "why the hell don't you stay in Texas where there's plenty of 'em?"

"There's enough women for me," said Duke. "What with that preacher's redhead and some of them men's wives down there not bein' too old to interest me. But it's the redhead I'm after. We're takin' rides alone now and I want to tell you that preacher better start worryin' over his girl."

Wallace, eating across the table from Duke, said, "You're a liar and a damn polecat, Duke!" and got up to slap the flat of his hand across Duke's face. Duke lunged across the table at Wallace and Wallace sent a fist into Duke's jaw. Duke tripped over his bench and went back to land against the wall, to lie for a moment stunned.

Then recovering he reached for his gun. Gavin hurdled the table, landed on top of him, smashing him in the face again, to twist the gun away and drop it on the table.

Porter got to his feet and then with the men making room for them in the narrow room they were at it hammer-and-tongs. Duke Porter was a lazy cowboy but in a fight he had the speed of a striking snake. He hit twice to Wallace's one. A flurry of lefts and rights to Wallace' head dazed the rancher, but steadily he moved in on Duke, finally cornering him to send in solid wallops that had the power of an engine piston.

Duke, backing away, fell through the open doorway and Wallace followed. Outside Duke tried his luck at wrestling. The two rolled on the ground, Duke viciously jabbing thumbs at Wallace's eyes. In return Wallace repeatedly flattened Duke's nose. Finally with both their faces bloody, they got to their feet. Duke was weaving and one of his eyes had closed.

A sledge hammer hit Duke and he went to his knees, then to his side. He lay still. He had had enough.

"Get up!" roared Wallace, and Duke got up, staggered about blindly and went down again, begging Wallace to quit.

"I've heard enough of your talk about women," said Wallace. "Saddle your own horse and ride out."

"Only Milner can fire me," returned Porter. "He's the one pays me my wages."

"Ride out!" repeated Wallace. "You're through at this camp."

Slowly Duke got to his feet; wiped away blood. "All right," he said. "But sometime I'll pay you back for this." He rolled his bed,

saddled and headed slowly down the valley.

"I'd look out for him," warned Wig. "Duke's 100-proof coyote. When you took his gun you ort to of killed him."

Riding in the valley Dad Bone met Preacher McAllister a week or so later. "Duke's stayin' down at the colony," Dad quoted McAllister. "Guardin' their horses at night against Indians. This Apache devil, Juan Jacinto that massacred the Plaza once, is on the loose again. A detail of hoss sojers brung a warning to the colony. McAllister said if we seen any Injuns to hustle to the fort—to take sanctuary, he called it."

"If I need sanctuary I'll take it in a praire dog hole," Wallace growled. "Them tenderfeet better get out of the country while they're still wearin' their scalps. They got no chance, ramrodded by a preacher who'll be scared to death at the first war whoop."

That evening the smiling youth, Apache Martinez, who had been a prisoner of the Apaches as a boy, rode into camp with his guitar over his saddlehorn. Milner had sent him from Santa Fe. He brought money to pay the men's wages and buy supplies. After supper he played and sang Spanish songs. It was as good as a show.

"You tell Milner I'll expect him here at the end of the four months to take over his cattle," said Gavin, between songs.

The youth grinned. "Sure, I tell Meester Milner."

"What's the latest on the Apache raids?" asked Wig.

Martinez shrugged. "Those raids ees only talk," he said. "Some wan kill some wan; mos' likely some white men kill to make it look like Apache. No bad Indians in New Mexico. In Arizona maybe yes."

Duke Porter rode in a week later, just as they were eating supper.

"Kicked you out, did they?" asked Wig insultingly.

"You guessed it," admitted Duke, who seemed in a meek mood. "Preacher didn't like the way I was making up to his girl—I had it coming, Wallace. I learnt my lesson. I'm plumb out of money and I'd like to go back to work here. It's a long way to ride back to Texas without even two-bits for grub."

Wallace looked at him. "We can use a hand," he said, "if you'll make one."

"I'll make one," promised Porter. "I turned over a new leaf."

HE WORKED hard the next day, the first real day's riding he'd done on the ranch.

Wig was not impressed. "Look out for him," he warned Wallace. "Polecats don't lose their stripes or their smell. Duke never come up here to go to work. I don't like the way he watches you when your back is turned, all same as a hawk. Take my advice; chase him off. He's up here to get something and I got a hunch it might be you."

"Duke wouldn't take chances for nothing," said Wallace.

"Maybe somebody paid him to take chances —to get rid of you."

Wallace laughed at that idea, then he sobered. "If he came up here to bushwhack me, I'll give him his chance. Tomorrow morning you hitch up early and head out for wood. I'll send the rest out and keep Duke here, telling him we're riding out together."

"That may be taking a big chance," said Wig. "I'll tie my team over the hill and sneak back jist in case you need help."

At night Wallace announced his plans for the next day. Wig, watching Duke, could see nothing suspicious in the cowboy's face, but in the morning the cook muttered a bit of information to Wallace.

"Duke's a polecat, like I told you. You know that fancy blanket he claims some sweetheart back in Texas embroidered red roses on for him. He's always been fond of it. He took it out of his bed this morning and sneaked it down to the corral to put with his saddle blankets. He's gittin' ready to light outa here sudden-like, and before he goes he aims to salivate you."

Old Wig sometimes had an uncanny intuition into the motives of other men. Wallace was halfway impressed.

The others rode off and Wig drove away with his team, leaving Wallace and Duke alone in the camp shack. Wallace had been working on his saddle, his back to the wall. Duke was pretending to get a nail from his boot.

"Guess it's time to ride," said Wallace at last.

Duke's eyes met his unflinchingly. "Suits me," he said casually and headed out of the door. Wallace followed at his heels. Two steps outside Duke halted abruptly.

"I forgot my chewin,'" he said. "Left it in my other pants." He went back into the shack.

One of the holes serving as window was at the lower end of the house. Wallace on his way to the corral was due to walk by it. It flashed into his mind that as he passed it, Duke could be waiting at that window to shoot him in the back. Then Duke could ride out and be forty miles away by the time the crew returned.

Wallace hesitated and then drawing his own belt gun turned swiftly back to the doorway. He was not surprised to see Duke crouched at the side of the low window, six-shooter in his paw, plainly intending to bushwhack Wallace when he rounded the house corner.

"Bad guess, Duke," called Wallace, as he stepped into the room. Duke stiffened, and then in desperation whirled, firing a wild shot that whipped into the door lintel. The hammer of Wallace' gun fell and Duke with a muffled cry dropped his pistol and clutched at his chest. A second later, Duke lay down as if every muscle in his body was exhausted.

Wig, carrying a shotgun, rushed in through the doorway behind Wallace to stare popeyed.

"So he tried it!" said Wig.

Wallace nodded. "Was set to get me through that window."

Wig crossed to Duke, who was lying on his back, so still that he seemed already dead. "Who paid you to try this, Duke?" demanded Wig, shouting as if the wounded man were already halfway on his journey to hell. "Who paid you, hey?"

Duke's eyes opened and he stared at Wig. Then his lips twisted malignantly. His voice when it came was only a husky whisper.

"Who wants Wallace outa here?" he asked. "Who else but that cussed preacher who wants the whole valley for his colony?"

"The preacher, eh?" said Wig. "Paid you to kill Wallace, is that it? Why the ornery sidewinder hypocrite. He ought to be hung."

Duke's voice dropped lower. "Promised if I'd get rid of Wallace some way his girl would marry me. Damn him. Sending me to—to—" His voice trailed off and a convulsive shudder went through him. He asked for whiskey and Wig brought a bottle kept for snake-bite emergencies. Duke took a long drink, then lay back in a stupor from which he never wakened. Half an hour later he was dead.

They waited until the crew returned, then buried the man without benefit of service, shoveling dirt on the body wrapped in the fancy blanket embroidered with red roses.

"Next you ought to go down and shoot that preacher," said Wig. "In the belly so he'll suffer a while 'fore he dies."

"We'll go down with you and lynch the cuss," Dad Bone offered.

"Maybe you didn't believe Duke?" Wig said. "A dying man allus tells the truth, they say."

Wallace said nothing, but his thoughts about preachers were bitter.

Young Apache Martinez came through again, smiling as usual, carrying his guitar on his saddle. Milner had sent word he would be down in a few weeks to take over his herd.

"Looks like you'd be afraid to traipse through the country alone," said Wig. "They say down at Devlin's Store the Apaches is rampagin' all over the Territory."

Martinez shrugged. "Ees onlee talk," he said. "Maybe a few bucks go out to steal horses or scare some freighters." He stayed that night, playing his guitar, singing his Spanish love songs with a few of the Apache chants he had learned while he was a captive of Juan Jacinto. The savage Indian songs sent a sudden chill down the backs of the listeners.

Martinez asked about Duke. They told him Duke had suffered a bad case of lead poisoning. Martinez grinned in appreciation of the joke and remarked he was going to the Spanish Plaza for a few days. He wanted to try to make a deal with the colonists to freight goods for them out of Santa Fe.

CHAPTER THREE

Red Horde

AFTER Martinez left, Wallace and his crew took a day's vacation, leaving the blazing heat of the valley to ride into the mountains, up a creek to a shady spot near a big pool. They took the choice part of a quarter of a fat calf they had butchered, some treasured cans of fruit, and a jug of whiskey. For amusement there was fishing. Wallace and the Fisher brothers had brought candles to explore a limestone cave whose entrance they had discovered a month before.

Wig outdid himself in a mid-afternoon meal that put all of them to sleep except Joe Fisher who climbed a ridge to hunt for other caves. Reaching a point overlooking the Spanish Valley he saw what literally raised the hair on his head—a large party of Indians, hundreds it seemed to him—warriors, squaws and children, around the Wallace ranch shack. They had looted the camp but had not burned it, apparently fearing the smoke would warn the Spanish Plaza, undoubtedly their next objective. Joe Fisher dropped to the camp bottom in nothing flat to notify the others.

They mounted at once to ride out of the mountains, coming out on a ridge above the valley. The raiders were already traveling down the wide brushy arroyo, which led to the Plaza. It was like a people in migration; with them they drove numerous horses, mules and a few cattle. They were due to arrive at the Plaza an hour or so later, in the late afternoon when the men would be at work in the fields. Moving slowly the band made little dust, and the tall mesquite almost completely hid them. Caught outside their fort-like house, the people of the colony would have no chance. It would be plain slaughter.

Wallace had one brief thought: You wanted the Plaza people out of the country and these savages will see to that. The thought flashed through his mind and vanished. With it went a remembrance of the dying declaration of Duke that the preacher had sent him up to get rid of Wallace. Wig recalled it for him.

"Preacher McAllister sent Duke up to end you," said Wig. "Here's where he's on the gettin' end himself."

"You men stay back in the mountains until they've left the valley," said Wallace. "They may drive off a few head of our cattle; let 'em. I'll see you later."

"Where you goin', Gave?" demanded Wig.

"Riding to the Plaza," he said curtly. "I'll give 'em a chance to fort up before that bunch arrives."

Wig growled. "But hell, they sent up Duke to kill you. It's the preacher's fight, not yours. And you forget that a Texas preacher did no notifyin' of your folks when he seen the Comanches headin' their way. But no use talkin' to you. And what makes you think you're ridin' without me?"

"Count me in on that too," said Dad Bone. "Me, I've drunk too much firewater in my life to shoot straight, but those folks will need help down there after they've forted up."

"Yeah, they'll need help," agreed Alamo Torrey promptly. "White women and children down there, ain't there? And we're supposed to be white too. Let's get goin'."

The Fisher boys were already tightening their saddle cinches for a fast ride. Wallace looked at them all silently. They were going with him—old Wig, the two no-good whiskey soaks, Torrey and Bone; the young Fishers whose lives were ahead of them. They knew with the Apaches between them and the Plaza, the odds were stacked against the small party ever reaching the little fort.

"Hell, I thought you were a hard bunch," growled Wallace. "You damn fools got no sense. Tie your hats to your saddles; we're in for a ride."

Dropping off the ridge, they reached the valley bottom, to ride down an arroyo running parallel to the one the Apaches were taking toward the Spanish Plaza. They ran the danger of discovery at any instant by roving Apache scouts, but by a miracle they covered the miles without discovery.

WHEN they judged they were at a point opposite the Plaza, they halted. There was but one thing to do now—climb the low ridge to cross into the arroyo down which the Apaches were trailing. Here they would be in plain sight of the Indian horde. Which meant a hot pursuit while they climbed another ridge to reach the flats where the Plaza sat.

Just below the crest of the ridge they stopped to tighten cinches again. Then with Wallace in the lead, the six spurred over the ridge and down the slope, raising a cloud of dust.

The savages, a half mile up the arroyo, traveling quietly through cloaking mesquite, saw them at once. The warriors in the lead stared for a few seconds before they got into action. Then their voices came like the yelping of a hound pack sighting a jackrabbit, and at once they flogged and kicked their ponies into a hard run. A few of their rifles opened up over a range too great for accuracy, but the slugs were not far wide. The Apaches had discarded bows in favor of captured guns and they had disproved again and again the legend that no Indians could shoot straight.

Unexpectedly three scouts popped up from the side of the ridge the whites had just quited. This trio, less than two hundred yards distant, were riding furiously toward the pursued, to squeeze them in between them and the main party racing down the arroyo.

Toward the three, Wallace used the same tactics used in Texas in fighting Comanches when the odds were not too great: a bold charge. Before it the Apaches hesitated, one dismounting to fire over his horse's back. Before he could fire, shots struck him down. As he fell, the other two Apaches fled toward a rock pinnacle to use as a barricade.

This got rid of the scouts, but the howls and hoots of the main band had come nearer. Their savage racket, like nothing human, sent shivers down Wallace's back. At full speed again the six spurred up the long slope of the arroyo and thundered down toward the Plaza. The sound of the guns had carried warning to the men at work in the fields; already they were heading frantically for the safety of the Plaza walls.

Some, over a mile away, needed time to reach the walls and Wallace held up his party. They swung about to face the main band of warriors, coming full tilt up the slope in a wide-spread line, moccasined heels kicking a tattoo on pony flanks.

As they came in range, Wallace's party fired from their saddles, guns crashing out to pour a rapid fire into the warrior ranks. Three of the charging Apaches plummeted to the earth; as many horses somersaulted. The line of advancing horsemen acted as if blown apart; those on the flanks swerved; those in the middle did a rapid turnabout.

Again Wallace's party raced for the Plaza. From a far field a wagon, drawn by a white team at a gallop, was bringing half a dozen men. In another field a farmer had unhitched his plow team to leap on one horse and begin a desperate race for safety. The gardens close to the Plaza had been emptied of the women and children working in them, with a flock of small stragglers being herded through the wide gate in the walls. Men who had already reached the building were climbing the roofs to open fire.

To the south a team and wagon were racing from the big building to go to the rescue of several workers who were running for the

Plaza afoot. Driving the wagon was a tall man with a flaming red beard: the preacher. Picking up the men, he turned the team to head back for safety, pursued by four warriors, another little scouting party that had appeared from the mesquite.

Dad Bone, first to see the plight of the men in the wagon, let out a yell and promptly charged on the quartet, firing rapidly as he rode. They scattered before the one-man charge, but Wallace who had followed Bone, saw the cowboy's horse go down. He rode alongside and checked his mount to let Bone climb up behind him. Racing after the wagon, Wallace's horse slowed under its double burden and the shots of the pursuers came closer.

"Let me down a minute to hand them ornery pests a few slugs," said Dad Bone, but just then from the roof sounded the cannon-like *boom* of an old-time buffalo gun. The nearest warrior, a squalling buck in little more than bronze skin and loin cloth, flew spread-eagled to hit the ground and bounce like a rubber ball. At the same time Wig and the Fishers appeared to drive back the other three.

The wagon drawn by the white team was having its troubles. After the men in the vehicle raced a warrior taller by a foot than his squatty companions. The men in the wagon fired from the bouncing vehicle, but the tall warrior led a charmed life. Again the buffalo gun boomed and a rope seemed to jerk the big warrior from his mount. Miraculously that single gun on the roof held up pursuit for the few seconds which allowed the scattered whites to race safely through the gate.

Wallace's group, after seeing the last settler through the walls, rode in and the settlers hurried to close the double gate with its top of cedar spikes, barricading it with heavy timbers.

The fort meant doubtful safety. Everywhere the mesquite which crowded the cleared fields about the Plaza disgorged warriors, to add to the appalling number already in sight. As Apache forces went, this was no mere raiding band; it was an Army!

CHAPTER FOUR

Preachers Are Fighters

IN THE large central courtyard and the smaller ones, one at each end, was a wild confusion. Men with rifles ran to climb ladders to the flat roofs. Older boys were unhitching the wagon teams. Smaller children and some of the mothers were drawing water from a well to fill buckets and tubs for use in case of fire.

For a moment Gavin Wallace was taken back to a scene which he had often pictured in his mind: the attack on his family when his parents, his brother and sister, had been killed by Comanches. During that moment he was sick with fear for these women and children who had been brought from the safety of the East by Preacher McAllister to the imminent threat of massacre.

Wallace' group had turned their horses into a small adobe corral in the large yard and now stood for a moment, hesitating. Apache Martinez, the guitar-playing youth, came up grinning, carrying a rifle.

"I heard you fellows laugh at coming down here to be safe," he said. "But I notice you are here mighty quick when Apaches show up. Dobe walls with no windows look good to you, eh?"

"Listen, you!" growled Wig. "We seen the red devils from the mountains. We could of stayed hid, but Wallace aimed to sashay down to warn these folks and we came along for the ride. And you're the feller that said it was only talk about Apaches rampagin' over New Mexico. A hell of a good liar you turned out to be."

"He told us the same thing," put in a Plaza settler, stopping on his way to the roof. "Or we'd of had a guard out. He said the Indians had quieted down. I say send him out now to tell them red devils they've quieted down."

Martinez stepped back, his smile gone. "I make the mistake," he said quickly. "But this devil, Juan Jacinto, who can tell where he will show up next?"

"That's Juan Jacinto's renegade bunch, is it?" asked Wallace.

"Si," said Martinez. "Juan Jacinto. The worst of them all. I ought to know. He kill my padre and my madre and make me his prisoner when I am boy."

McAllister hurried up, carrying a rifle with two cartridge belts slung over his shoulder bandoleer fashion.

"I understand that you rode here to warn us," he told the cowboys. "After the Apaches had passed you by. You saved all our lives. We'd have had no chance. You can use your own judgment about where you fight and how you fight. We'll be strung out thin on the roofs. Six of our men left two days ago to freight in supplies, after Martinez told us that the Indians were quiet in New Mexico."

"I say put Martinez out there," suggested the settler again, but Martinez had slipped away.

"We have enough cartridges for a week's siege," said McAllister. "And some kegs of black powder we were using to blast through rock for irrigation ditches. If those howling devils break in here, we'll use that powder on them."

The yells and hoots of the attackers grew

louder and came closer. The firing took on a deadly earnestness. At once Wallace and his men climbed the numerous short ladders giving access to the flat dirt roofs over the rooms that made the outer walls of the little fort. The Fishers joined the settlers crouched behind the parapet of the long north wall, looking up the valley; Wallace and the others scattered to reinforce the riflemen on the other sides.

The Apaches never indulged in fancy cavalry charges. They would have laughed at the crazy antics of the Plains Indians who rode circles around wagon trains and even forts, firing under the necks of their mounts. Apaches rightfully considered such tactics childish. Juan Jacinto's warriors, sending the young boys to take their horses back out of rifle range, advanced on foot, crawling mainly along the irrigation ditches which supplied the community vegetable gardens. The gardens had been made close to the walls, the settlers thinking that the shallow little trenches scraped out by hoes would give no cover to attackers. They had been wrong. The Apaches, after caking their bodies with dirt until they were the color of the soil, slithered along the little ditches, to get within fifty feet of the wide gate.

Covering these warriors, other bucks in the deeper ditches poured in a furious fire at the loopholes in the south roof. Accompanying the shots came a swarm of arrows sailing into the corrals where the horses were penned. Some of the arrows were blazing and piles of hay and fodder were set afire, sending a shower of smoke and sparks over the roofs.

The barbarous hoots and howls redoubled in volume. Under cover of the smoke, half a dozen warriors crawled to stacks of hay near the outside corrals, to set them afire. The smoke cloud thickened. Groups of warriors threatened first one side and then another of the fort, hoping to make the defenders show themselves as targets. The Easterners shot wildly, trying to find the almost invisible dust-covered men.

NEXT to Wallace squatted a sandy-mustached old-timer with a buffalo gun. Chewing calmly on a cud of tobacco, he searched patiently to discover a square inch of what might be coppery skin. No tenderfoot, Jeb Straw was the marksman whose long-range shots with his breech-loading .50 Sharps had made it possible for the settlers to get behind the walls.

"I believe in blowin' a hole in the varmints you kin drive a wagon through," he remarked to Wallace and Wig. "That was a purty ride you fellers made in gittin' here."

"It might of looked purty from here," said Wig. "From where we was at, there warn't no points of beauty to it I could notice."

Vincie McAllister came on the roof, bringing cartridges in sacks, of different calibers. Her eyes were as calm as they had been when she and her father had been in danger of drowning in the river.

"You men rode down here to warn us," she said to Wallace. "I thought you'd be glad if the Apaches wiped us out?"

"I hope you don't think I'd be glad of that," returned Wallace.

Wig spoke up. "It was right noble of him to come, miss. "Specially after you folks sent up that Duke Porter to kill him."

She gasped, and then stared hard. "You thought—we sent up—"

"I don't say you knowed it," said Wig. "But Duke after he tried to bushwhack Wallace admitted your paw sent him up to git rid of him."

Her eyes blazed. "It was a lie. Duke lied. Father sent Duke away because he— You surely didn't think that father would hire a man to kill you?" she appealed to the rancher.

Wallace shook his head. "For a while I thought it possible. I was pretty bitter at preachers. But I was a fool to believe it. I've been a fool in a lot of ways."

There was a flurry of yells and shooting. Dad Bone and Alamo Torrey and half a dozen settlers were shooting frantically from the south parapet. Wallace and Wig rushed to join them. At least twenty warriors, under cover of the billowing smoke, were showing signs of making a rush. Wallace crouched behind McAllister at a loophole and saw the minister level his rifle and fire, a quick shot. A yell came from out of the smoky confusion, and then a buck rose from a ditch and then went down, with other rifles sending shots into him to make sure he was dead.

"Good shooting, Parson," exclaimed Wallace, and fired over McAllister's shoulder.

The shooting died temporarily and McAllister slowly shook his head. "Shooting was once all I thought about—shooting and killing. For the four years of the war between the States, I knew only shooting and killing. It sickened me and I went into the ministry where I thought I'd be through with fighting. But it seems one is never done fighting."

The voice was mournful. Wallace had never accepted fully that this man had sent Duke up to kill him. He knew now that Duke in a spirit of malignant vengeance for having been kicked out of the Plaza had branded the minister with the blame for the bushwhack attempt against Wallace.

A little distance away, Apache Martinez was yelling at the Indians, shouting to them in their own guttural tongue. It gave McAllister an idea. "Tell them that we have sixty men in here," he directed. "And if they

do not leave immediately, we will come out and destroy them to the last man."

The boy began shouting a string of the strange sounding syllables. The Indian guns fell silent. Some warrior shouted a guttural answer and the savage yells burst out again.

"That's Juan Jacinto's brother," reported Martinez. "He say he know you have less than thirty men while they have over a hundred. And that when they are through playing they'll come in here and all who are still alive will burn."

"We will have to hold out for only an hour or two," said McAllister. "The soldiers must be following them and they cannot risk too long a time in one spot. If we can hold them off two hours they will leave."

McAllister left to go to another part of the roof, standing erect as he walked.

"And I said that sky pilot would run at the first war whoop," Wig said.

THE firing became brisker on the north and east. Apache Martinez crawled across the roof and disappeared. Wallace crossed to the north wall where the guns were booming loudest. It was puzzling to him; there seemed no reason for the tremendous amount of lead the Apaches were hurling.

A woman's scream came from the west end of the long building. Wallace whirled to see Alamo Torrey standing above the small courtyard, directing his rifle barrel downward. Alamo was firing into the courtyard, from which savage hoots suddenly sounded. In some way a party of warriors had gotten through the walls.

The fort was as good as taken.

Wallace and other men ran across the long stretch of roof toward the west in the almost vain hope of averting total disaster, knowing it was already too late. Ahead of them went Preacher McAllister, carrying a keg under one arm, and in his other hand a blazing pitch pine torch. What happened Wallace did not fully comprehend at the time. In the smoke swirling over the building, he had a blurred glimpse of the preacher leaping from the roof into the small courtyard.

There came a great sheet of flame and a tremendous roar, as if a small sun had burst. The keg had contained powder. The minister had deliberately made himself into a living bomb.

Then Wallace and half a dozen others were standing upon the roof edge, staring at the horrible remnants of copper-hued bodies, strewn in mangled and shattered pieces about the courtyard. In a far corner they also saw several warriors who had been knocked down by the blast but were getting to their feet apparently unhurt. The rifles on the roof blasted them down again to stay, and then Wallace led the way into the courtyard and hurried to shut a little narrow gate.

"I fastened that door shut myself," said one of the settlers.

Someone called to them through the smoke filled with the acrid smell of burnt powder—Apache Martinez lying in a corner, blood running from a mangled stump of an arm.

"Help, I bleed to death," he said.

The old-timer with the buffalo gun, Jeb Straw, walked over, and lifted a foot as if to kick the wounded youth. "You ort to bleed to death for a thousand years," said Jeb Straw. "It was you let them Injuns in, you treacherous renegade. Old pals of yours, them Juan Jacinto warriors; raised with 'em you was. You gave the varmints the word to come down yere and you opened that gate for 'em. You're still a Apache."

Apache Martinez cringed from the old man. Then, realizing he was doomed to die anyway, he forced a smile to his powder-blackened face. "*Si*, I'm Apache—more Apache than white. Juan Jacinto, he adopt me as his son. I send him word to come to Spanish Plaza, to get lots of guns, cartridges. And a man was to pay me one thousand dollars after Juan Jacinto kill all the Spanish Plaza people."

"Who was to pay you the thousand?" asked Jeb Straw.

"Meester Jay Milner. He want this valley for his ranch and he want your cattle, Wallace."

"And Milner was the one hired Duke to come up to kill me?" asked Gavin.

"*Si*," said Apache Martinez. "He was afraid the Apaches don' get you." He held himself erect for a moment, the smile making a hideous mask of his powder-burned face. Then he collapsed.

* * *

It was the end of the battle. Apaches never held for fighting to the last man unless they were cornered. The whole strategy of the Apaches with their small numbers was based on keeping their own hides intact while killing the greatest possible number of their enemies. To an Apache band the loss of one man was as serious as the annihilation of an entire regiment to a modern army. Retreating hastily, the renegades rode for the shelter of the mountains. A dust cloud on their back trail indicated fast moving cavalry was after them.

One week later Juan Jacinto's disheartened warrior remnant was surprised and wiped out by Mexican troops a hundred miles south of the Border. Before that, on their way to the Border, twisting and turning to throw off U.S. cavalry, they had come on a buckboard

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GUN-KING OF A

Smashing Owlhoot Novel by Harry F. Olmsted

The Mescalero Kid's hate of the state was burning out, and his road ahead looked mighty dark, so he reckoned it time to start riding a new and straighter trail. But he found that the ghosts of an owlhoot past don't easily fade, and the gunsmoke IOU's he'd put his name to, relentlessly sought him out for bitter, final collection.

GRAVEYARD TOWN!

CHAPTER ONE

Men Gone Bronc

HIGH in the cedars, where the backbone of the Broken Tongue Mountains overlooks the flat sweep of Concho Basin, five men sprawled in the shade beside their drowsing ponies. Five stolid, silent men whose restless eyes looked down the timbered slopes to a white road that twisted along the hogback. They watched that stretch of road and waited for the coming of the stage.

Clay Buckalew squinted at the sun, shook his mane of corn-colored hair and wiped his Stetson's sweatband. "An hour late," he chuckled. "Funny if she'd pick today to pile up over the grade."

Devine's bullet struck the guard squarely, knocking him off the coach deck.

"Or went the long way, through Nachees Canyon," added the big man whose lantern jaw had earned him the name of Jawbone. His chin jutted out as if to meet his down-curving beak of a nose. He was dark as an Indian, this Jawbone Cordis. "Ain't no more luck fer us, you hear me? If we git close to that mazuma, we'll all be kilt. Stage ain't comin' this-away."

"Still diggin' our graves with your jawbone," Parson Devine taunted. Devine was a cynical slat of a man who found a moral in every situation, fact or fancy. He lay, ear-down, on his small belt canteen, his gaunt features thoughtful. "The stage is right on us, the off-wheeler lame an' the driver favorin' him. No cavalry escort for the governor; only two shotgun guards. I can hear 'em talkin'."

"You claim to hear all that?" Clay asked coldly.

"That an' more, you bet yuh. The governor's wearin' a fancy Swiss watch. It's ringin' the hour right now. Check me, boys."

"You're loco," Stumpy Reardon growled. "You're makin' it up." But he consulted his watch and looked frightened. It was ten o'clock, straight up!

"Gimme a listen," demanded Ozark Wooten, a grizzled little man who was as spare of words as of flesh. Parson grinned and made way for him. Ozark laid on his stomach, put his ear to the tinned water bottle. Scorn came to his seamed face. "Can't hear a damned thing, an' you can't neither."

"Gotta have special ears," Parson explained, as he had many times before. "A shotgun went off alongside my head, bustin' a ear drum." He yawned, stretched, hitched his gunbelt. "Time to be gettin' posted, boys. Coach will be here in ten minutes."

They swapped looks, those four who believed the Parson "tetched"—even though they had never found his listenings far wrong. Doubt shadowed their eyes but they accepted his judgment and moved single file, down the slant to Point of Rocks, on to the stage road. There, where boulders squeezed the trace to a slot, they took position: Clay and Ozark on one side, Jawbone and Stumpy on the other, Parson atop a boulder commanding the road both ways.

Time moved slowly. Each moment, dragging out, seemed like an hour to these tense and desperate men. Ozark muttered, "I don't like that Parson gent. He's a crazy man if ever I knowed the meanin'. If I git outa this, our last job, it'll be too soon if I never see him again."

"Last job," Clay murmured. "We've run our course. Our hate's burnin' out. Trail's filling with snares. Time to blot our tracks an' begin life again." Regret was in him, and a sense of failure and futility.

His thought of his home among the tall cottonwoods of Alamocito, on the Concho. His mind went back to his father, famed for Indian fighting, diligent drinking and fluent profanity. His frail, tired mother, claimed by the cruel land in Clay's tenth year. A sister, dead of *viruelas*, so long ago he couldn't remember how she looked. Neighbors, living and dead, strung along the Concho, living on the bounty of the rich bottomlands, bringing up their families.

The virtues of these settlers—and they were many—were nullified by a single sin: procrastination. Each had taken his supposed rights too much for granted, ever promising that tomorrow he would undertake the long trip to Santa Fe, make the long delayed homestead filing to supplement his brave confidence in Squatters' Rights.

But tomorrow never comes, despite the *mañana por la mañana* of the Mexicans. The rights of the squatter, long guaranteed by a paternal government, proved a mirage upon passage of the Lieu Land Law. This is how it was:

OCTAVIOUS LEATHERWOOD and a group of rich men requested the State Land Office to select unpatented Concho lands in lieu of scattered school lands, which would be transferred to the Federal Government. When this took place, the rights of the squatters passed with the title. One hundred thousand acres were sold from the Concho Courthouse steps—*in one individual block.*

Squatters, duly notified, stood helplessly by and watched their holdings sold—land, buildings, everything they held dear. The sheriff, disgusted but bound by his duty, posted the contested plots and then evicted the squatters—those who did not accept the pittance offered by Irrigated Estates for a quit-claim deed.

Those without families resisted. The sheriff and a deputy were wounded. Clay Buckalew became the Mescalero Kid, with a score of embittered fighters at his back. Twice they dynamited the uncompleted dam in the Narrows. Supply wagons were stopped, cargoes burned, stock slain. A paymaster was halted. But now the law was closing in for the kill. Every man's gun was against them. Alarmed, weaker members slipped away until only five remained, and their days were numbered.

Today the Concho was settling down. Stored water was ready for the ditches. Concho City would be in gala attire: flags flying, pennants streaming, bunting draping a new speakers' stand. Barbecue pits, with their succulent smells, would be working overtime. Cowboys, dirt farmers, Mexicans and Indians would be milling excitedly as they awaited the arrival of the morning stage, which would bring the governor, the congressman, President Leather-

wood and the comptroller of Irrigated Estates.

At ten—and it was past that now—the parade was scheduled to start. Cowboys on prancing ponies. A brass band from the Indian School. Indians in tribal finery, outridden by aged scouts who had served under Crook in the Apache campaigns. Carriages filled with feeble Frontiersmen, down from the Pioneer's Home at Preston. The queen and her princesses, elected in the town. Cavalry from Fort Cousins. The drill team of the K.P.'s. The sheriff and his deputies leading the march, on white horses.

At eleven, in Cowskin Narrows, the governor was to open the gates, letting water into the thirsty ditches. Upon the return to Concho, there would be roast beef and chili beans and free beer for everybody, with soda pop for the kids. At two, after a siesta, there would be speaking in the plaza. The governor, the congressman, the sheriff, the mayor—each would try to outdo the other in extolling the happy future of the Concho Basin. Small time in Concho for thoughts of the Mescalero Kid and his harried followers, who waited at Point of Rocks for the delayed El Paso stage and its thirty thousand dollar freight—the closing payroll and final contract payment. Small return indeed for legally stolen ranches, water rights and the graves of pioneer settlers.

From the top of the boulder, Parson's low voice roused Clay Buckalew from his unhappy reverie. "Tails up, *compañeros*! She's windin' along the hogback. Tighten up your gunbelts an' loosen your cutters!"

"Listen to me—everybody!" Clay's voice held a note of command, seldom assumed, never ignored. "I want no killing, you understand? If they fight us, shoot for arms and legs. We've no murder charge against us as yet. Let's fade out of the picture with that record."

They accepted it as an order, without argument. Each man was straining his ears, intent upon the ever-nearing grind of steel tires against gravel. No man spoke. Clay could hear his heart beating in his chest, the heavy breathing of his companions. He was afraid, deathly afraid. Not for himself, but for his saddlemates. Now, from the lookout, Parson droned: "Somebody jest warned the shotgun men to look alive at Point uh Rocks. Somebody's due to die, mebbyso us." They knew he had listened on his canteen.

Clay swore and Ozark touched him. "Steddy, son. Waitin's the hardest."

Clay relaxed. He could hear the hoofbeats of the straining stage ponies, their labored breath. Hidden from the rocking Concord, he dared not peek or move. Then the leaders drew abreast and he shouted: *"Now!"* and leaped at the off-leader. Jawbone, across the road, threw himself at the nigh bridle. Ozark and Stumpy raced back, covering the driver and the coach interior. Atop the rock, Parson's voice crackled.

"Floor the bird guns, gents! Clutch yoreselfs handful uh sky! Quick!"

The leaders reared, were pulled down. The brake screeched. The coach shuddered to a halt, half obscured by trailing dust. The guards, thrown forward, righted themselves, located the masked man on the rock and let passion overcome their reason. Their guns lifted. One bawled, "Take a smell uh this, feller!"

Parson Devine roared: "Judas priest, yo're askin'!" and fired.

CHAPTER TWO

Coyote Trail

DEVINE'S bullet struck the guard squarely, fatally, knocking him off the coach deck. His mate's scattergun blared. Parson, levering in a shell, was blown back and down by the buckshot charge. Inside the coach, the governor was yelling, "Holdup! Kill them, boys! Holdup!"

A voice answered him. "Sit still, Governor. This is the Mesealero Kid. We've hoped he'd come and we're ready for him." The stage door flashed open and big President Leatherwood leaped out, facing forward, revolver questing for targets as Ozark caught the seat rail, footed the step and jumped for the box. Leatherwood fired at him and missed.

The driver, until now stiff and quiet, came to life and clubbed at Ozark with his loaded whipstock. Ozark ducked and struck him in the face with his swinging gun barrel, knocking him into the boot, out cold.

Leatherwood, a beefy, carefully-groomed man whose every line reflected carnal appetite and stubborn will, was aiming again at Ozark, his left eye closed. Clay Buckalew, handicapped by the terrified horse he held, brought up his carbine and fired. It was a snap shot and a lucky one. His bullet struck the promoter in the leg, smashing the bone and flattening him as if a scythe had cut him down.

Across the teams, Stumpy Reardon caught the hub, lifted himself as the second guard rose and threw down on Clay. Stumpy's six-shooter blew the guard off the coach. At almost the same instant, the coach door on that side opened and the comptroller quit the rig, dodging like a rabbit as he ran. Stumpy, caught in the blood lust of the moment, threw a shot after him—and the shot scored. Six seconds had ticked away. Six men were down.

It was a hard lesson for those remaining in the coach and now they cried their surrender, and then moved out with their arms

elevated; the governor, his secretary and another official representing the State Treasurer. A badly frightened trio which meticulously obeyed Clay's orders to disarm and stand aside.

According to plan, Ozark now took the ribbons and slipped the brake. Jawbone climbed to the rock top and brought down the limp body of the Parson, whose bloody, lolling head looked as though it had been shot away. They loaded him into the coach and Clay said, "Stay here for thirty minutes, Governor, and you'll be safe enough. Then walk a half mile to the coach and go on into Concho City. We shall bother your country no more unless you refuse to tell the truth about who started this shooting. If you don't—look out. Get in, boys."

The horses leaped forward. The outlaws swung aboard, rode to the summit and a scant half mile beyond. Here, where the faint trail led down from the spring where the ponies were tethered, Ozark halted. Parson was coming out of it, moaning with pain. Jawbone, attending him, shook his head at Clay's: "How's he doing? Any chance?"

"He's bleedin' awful bad, Clay. Seven buckshot through his shoulders, neck an' face. Teeth an' nose shot away—an' one ear. He's dyin'."

He had no idea the wounded man could be in condition to comprehend and was startled when Devine's head rolled and from his gory, lacerated lips came faintly: "Like hell, I'm dyin'. I'm plenty Texas, me." Then he passed out again.

Clay turned away, feeling pity and shame at his dislike of the man who had aspired to supplant him and lead the band on more desperate ventures. Jawbone and Stumpy were dragging out two heavy leather bags that were edged with steel and sealed with padlocks. Jawbone flipped open a clasp knife and Clay halted him. "Not here, Jawbone. Not till we put long miles behind us. Tie 'em on the saddles."

Jawbone bristled. "Says who? We agreed tuh split after this 'un, ever' man takin' his own trail. I want mine now." Stumpy nodded, his hand on his gun butt.

Clay froze. "Gettin' out of hand, eh? Been listening to Parson. All right; how bad you want the split . . . now?"

He faced them down, feeling their sullen anger. His hands hung limp but an explosive readiness and fierce expectancy cowed them. Their eyes wavered, then dropped. Jawbone shifted. "No use blowin' up, feller. Me an' Stumpy hang together."

"On a cottonwood, if you ain't careful," Clay added.

"Not yet a while, Buckalew. You an' Ozark split yores anytime you like. We'll settle fer one uh them bags."

"I guess you would," Clay said, "and make off with half of Parson's share."

"We'll take care of Parson," Stumpy said eagerly.

"I can guess how," Clay rapped. "No dice. On second thought, I'd rather be rid of you at the expense of time. Open one bag. Ozark, put a fifth in your tow sack for Parson's wife. That's it, boys."

They accepted, grumblingly. The bag was split open. Too small a portion of newly-minted double eagles was transferred to Ozark's sack. Jawbone and Stumpy hurriedly departed with their cut. They were gone when Clay and Ozark arrived at the ponies, carrying Parson. No farewells, no handgrips, no regrets that a brotherhood of wronged men was breaking up.

"Good riddance." Ozark spat. "Lucky they didn't glaum our broncs."

Clay grunted, where he knelt beside Parson, puzzled, worried. The man was unconscious, his wounds no longer bleeding, his heart-beat strong. Though the man was a ball and chain on their bodies and spirits, they still could not abandon him to die.

They tied Devine in his saddle and set out for God knew where. During those first few miles, Parson came alive, suffering horribly, begging them to kill him or for a gun to dispatch himself. Only shorter and shorter periods of unconsciousness relieved him. Shaken by the man's torment, knowing the rigors of the trail must end his life, Clay led the way off the heights into Conejo Canyon. There, in a small Mexican settlement, they paid a crone two gold pieces and Parson's horse to nurse the wounded man and to give him Christian burial in case he died.

A burden off their shoulders, Clay and Ozark shook hands in the dusty adobe village, unable to speak their thoughts. They had been closer than the others. More often than not they saw eye to eye. Each felt they would never meet again in this world.

"Easy trails, son," Ozark said gruffly.

"Take care of yourself, old-timer."

They split the stage money, stepped into their saddles and rode in opposite directions, without a backward look.

THROUGH a manhunt spreading across five counties, Clay followed the twisting ridges, traveling by night, sleeping bushed up by day. Always moving westward. Eating in isolated mining, sheep or line camps where he was welcomed without question. Across the Burros, the Conquistadores, the Mogollones. Fording the Frisco, Gila and Blue. And so into Arizona where many a desperate man before him had found sanctuary.

The early sun was hot the morning Clay cantered into Rillito town, where the intermit-

tent Paladura joins the Wallapai River. Gaunt, bearded, weary of being hunted, he had decided further running was not worth the price. His horse was a scarecrow. It was time to settle like dust; try, somehow, to resume a normal life.

He rode slowly toward Brady's Barn, scrutinizing the town. Sprawling between basalt bluffs, it could be reached only by dugway from the mesa or *caliche* ford across the Wallapai. Its adobe buildings were dominated by the squarish courthouse, with its barred pail wing and flying flag. Save for a couple of saloons and as many business establishments, the place looked down at the heel. Only its location—a center of a great mineral and grazing area—kept it alive. The community was the seat of Wallapai County government. A man of vision, drive and means might prosper here, if . . .

Clay stalled his horse, ordered a nervous hostler to "grain him heavy. He's eaten scruboak in sheep country till he bleats and spits acorns."

"Yes, sir." The man's shifty-eyed suspicion spoke eloquently of Clay's own disreputable appearance. "It's usual fer strangers to pay in advance."

Clay didn't argue. He handed over a double eagle and walked out with his sixty pound saddlebags. His business here was pressing, but the hostler's manner dictated an immediate betterment of appearance. In a barber shop, Clay bathed, was shaved and clipped. A drink in the Big Casino Saloon banished weariness, imparted a sense of respectability. This feeling grew after a full meal at the Saddlerock.

Clay looked like another man as he strode resolutely along Arizona Street to a small store, half hidden by flowering ironwoods. A faded sign identified the place.

RILLITO VARIETY STORE
MILLY CARTER, PROP.

Clay pushed inside, stood at the threshold, squinting through the gloom. He was tall and wide-shouldered, older than his twenty-seven years, with denims faded and worn, black Stetson sweat-stained, dust-grimed. An air of neat cleanliness touched him. Here were clean pine shelves and counters; carefully racked bolt goods, notions, tinware, stationery.

A graying, tired-looking woman was suddenly framed in the rear doorway. "I didn't hear you enter, sir. Have I anything you want?"

Horsewhipping would have been preferable to the brutality of Clay's mission. "I'm Mescalero!" he blurted. He heard a quick gasp and the sound of her approach. "I came—"

"I saw a Prescott paper, Clay. I—" She paused, thin, blue-veined hands stifling her flow of words. "Paul? You—you come about him? He—he's—"

"Alive when I saw him last, Miz Carter. I doubt he could live long. We left him in good hands when it was plain riding would kill him. . . ."

The woman's hands clasped and unclasped. Her lips moved as if in prayer. For all Parson Devine's neglect of this gentle woman, she still loved him. Her eyes lifted, her cheeks traced with tears. "I—I understand. I've expected it, but it still is shocking. I've stayed here, hoping he'd call me to his ranch to be a wife to him. Our quarrel was so . . . so trivial. . . ." She hid her face and began to cry.

"You knew he lost the ranch?" Clay asked gently.

"He wrote me and said he was turning outlaw. I wanted to help him, but—"

"What will you do now, ma'am?"

"Sell. The Rillito Mercantile wants me out of business. Except for the kindness of freighters, the Merc would have kept me from getting goods. I'll go back to Texas and my people."

"I'll buy your store." Clay knew this proud woman would not accept charity, and probably not blood money. When she lifted astonished eyes, he added, "How much will they pay you?"

"Just my inventory. Six or seven hundred dollars."

"I'll give ten times that."

"No, I can't accept more than it's worth. Anyway, you—a man can't run a small variety store in Rillito." She was laughing at him through her tears.

Clay told her then that the money rightly belonged to Parson, that it was hers and he would add the Merc's price for the store. He had to argue and scold and she had just accepted the offer when she recoiled from something she had seen outside the window. Staring out, Clay saw the blocky, mustached man striding toward the house, a star on his vest, a gun slapping his thigh.

"Who's that?" Buckalew asked.

"Sheriff Hatch, Clay. Now what can he want?" And, when Clay involuntarily palmed his gun: "No, Clay! Not that! No!"

Clay said swiftly, "I'm your brother, Buck Clayton. Running the store while you visit in Texas. Understand?"

"Yes." She was grim-lipped and game. The door opened. The lawman moved inside, his face heavy with suspicion. "You all right, Miz Carter? This man makin' trouble?"

"Not at all, Sheriff." Milly was steady. "Shake hands with my brother, Buck Clayton. Buck, this is Absolam Hatch, our fine sheriff."

They crossed palms, the lawman embarrassed. "Glad to know you, Buck. They told me a rough had entered here who might be the

Mescalero Kid, a killin' snake from New Mexico. Sorry. Settlin' here, Clayton?"

"Could be, Sheriff."

"Fine. If I can ever help, let me know. *Adios,* Miz Carter; hurry back." He backed out and bowlegged away. Milly Carter slumped into a chair. Clay sighed: "Thanks."

Don't stay, Clay," she begged. "Go to Mexico or California . . . anywhere. You'll hang if they find the truth."

Her fear, he knew, was grounded in long loneliness and worry over a man gone bronc. She must always worry; that was Parson's legacy. Clay gave her a bear hug, counted out the money, packaged it and had her sign a bill-of-sale for the store, land, stock and fixtures.

Dry-eyed and silent, Milly prepared lunch, then readied herself. Clay carried her grips to the stage office and bade her goodbye. "You're young," he said, "and can find happiness. Forget Parson and this country. If you need help, write me. I'll not fail you."

She kissed him impulsively as the three o'clock stage rolled in from Hardyville. Then the stage had changed horses and rolled out toward Prescott. Clay watched the handkerchief fluttering farewell until distance swallowed it. Then he filled his lungs and took the first step of many that were to make him marked in Rillito town.

CHAPTER THREE

A Boss Is Born

RATHER than advertise his store of gold, Clay deposited only a thousand dollars in the Rillito State Bank. But his arrival had occasioned comment and Rillito folk never quit wondering about the tall, cool-eyed man who gave himself to the bustling town life. Within the week, he joined the Merchant's Association, met Rillito's important men, lifted his voice in the town councils. Safety, he figured, lay in playing a leading role. He bought a lot, hired Mexicans to make adobes and erected a large store. When the jealousy of his competitors blocked his supply he secured teams, hired freighters and threw himself into transportation—hauling from the rails to scattered communities and mines.

Prosperity came quickly. He closed the Carter store, using it for a bachelor home. He tended the big store, mixed freely, administered his growing freight business. Buckskinners found him difficult to trifle with. One trouble-maker showed up at the Big Casino with a battered face and the confession that "Buck Clayton's hell with his fists, an' fast."

Menaced by lawless men ambitious to live off the thrift of others, Clay hired fighting men, sent out three to a twelve-mule jerkline outfit—a thrifty extravagance. Two such outfits, bound for the Turkey Track Mines, were jumped by *buscaderos.* In a fight labeled Battle of the Turkey, the renegades were repulsed by well armed, fast shooting wagon men. Three attackers were slain, as many wounded. One was captured and, threatened with hanging, talked freely.

He had been hired by Field Crockett, he said, to destroy Clayton wagons wherever found. Crockett, owner of Rillito Merc, Big Casino Saloon, *Desert News* and Wallapai Transportation, was a complex man. Director of the bank, deacon of the church, he had a mania for gambling and was a heavy investor in Trecab Mountain mining claims. It hardly seemed reasonable that he was mixed up in outlawry.

When word of the attack reached Clay, in Rillito, he wasted no time in buckling on a gun and setting out to find Crockett. The man, it appeared, had left town early with an assayer, to run hypo tests on his new Trecab properties. He wouldn't return till night.

About noon, the empty wagons rolled in with the prisoner, who repeated his confession to Sheriff Hatch, begging for protection from Crockett. Hatch jailed him and came to Clay for a complaint against the town's first citizen. Clay refused.

"I aim to handle this my way, Sheriff," Buckalew told the lawman.

"What way is that?"

"Tell you after I talk with Crockett."

Hatch sputtered. "No gunplay, you hear me? I'll not have it, Clayton."

"Wouldn't think of it, Sheriff. But if Crockett gets tough, I'll defend myself."

Troubled and muttering, Hatch departed. Down at the jail, he found a crowd gathering and learned the cause. A stranger had ridden to the jail, tied his pony and entered the sheriff's office. A shot sounded. The man came out, mounted unhurriedly and rode away. A townsman, fearful he would find Hatch riddled, discovered the prisoner lifeless in his cell, lying in his own blood.

That night, Crockett walked into his own house, bawling for the Mexican servant who should have had his supper waiting. He made a light, starting as a voice spoke behind him.

"Howdy, Crockett. Neat killing, that jailhouse job."

Crockett turned. "C-Clayton! What you talking about—jailhouse job? I've been out of town. Who's dead?" And then sourly: "What the hell you doing in my house?"

"Waiting to tell you Rellito isn't big enough for us both, Crockett."

"Interesting." Crockett smirked. "Sorry you're leaving. I like Rillito."

"Me too, Crockett. One of us leaves, vertical or horizontal. If you feel lucky jerk your

gun and blast me. Either do that or—"

"You talk like a fool, Clayton. I'm no gunman."

"That statement I question, my friend. If you don't like guns, take the option—t oker. We'll crack a deck and play it till one of us is busted. Loser takes twenty dollars from the winner and leaves town. Agreeable?"

Crockett was big, confident, merciless in business. His lip curled but in his dark eyes glowed a fierce satisfaction as he contemplated the humiliation of a rival. "Now you talk my language, Clayton. I'll eat supper and meet you at the Big Casino, at eight."

THAT game is still legend in Western Arizona. They played all night before a capacity audience. All the next day and the following night, until they were red-eyed automatons spurring their nerves with whiskey, coffee, tobacco.

The tide of fortune swayed. Clay lost his freight outfit, pitted his Mohave Trading Company against Crockett's Merc, and won. Riding his luck, he staked the two big stores against the freight lines, winning both back. Crockett's house and the *Desert News* went to Crockett. After that, the play see-sawed until noon of the second day when weariness dulled Crockett's game and luck deserted him. He stood up, reeling.

"Licked, Clayton." He failed in a smile. "Busted. Now I'll take that twenty."

Clay paid, watched the one-time dictator stumble from the barroom, dejected, exhausted, broken. Clay hunted his bed. He slept the clock around twice, rose refreshed, ravenous, eager to assume his new responsibilities.

Recognition came swiftly. He was elected head of the Merchant's Association and made a director in the bank. His name was filed for County Supervisor, come fall election. An audit showed him worth a half million, and the sky was the limit.

The one Crockett man Clay retained was John Grady, editor of the *News*. One day Grady came to him, excited. "It's come," he announced. "We're licked."

"Still got our health," Clay quipped.

"You won't have when you hear this, Clayton. Crockett's struck it rich in the Trecabs. Silver. The news is out and the rush is on. Shall I run it?"

"Why not?" Clay tried to keep his voice level. "Crockett will see that we get the details soon enough. Sure, print the news."

Grady snapped his fingers. "What a damn shame! In twenty-four hours we won't have a handful left here. All this—" he swept his hand at the town—"will topple like a card house. And we're hamstrung, hamstrung...." He walked dejectedly out.

Behind him he left Clay Buckalew, powerless to plumb the disaster. Rillito's prosperity was triple edged—sweet water, supply center, county seat. Trecab, with sweeter water, miles closer to the rails, needed only to wrest away the capital to doom her only rival. That would be easy, once the silver rush provided the votes.

Vainly, Clay reached for some faint reassurance. As Grady had said, the news would empty Rillito as a rent drains a sugar sack. Some would hope for a bonanza. Others would strive for a share of the boom business. However they fared, Rillito would become a ghost city. Clay's assets would vanish like smoke.

Out of the chaos of his thoughts, Clay found one clear judgment to be weighed. Should he throw in the sponge, join the rush and once again accept battle with a ruthless foe? Or should he stay in Rillito, go down with the sinking ship? Either way, as he saw it, his chance of winning was slight indeed.

How long he sat there, Buckalew couldn't have told. The sun went down. Dusk settled purple layers over the desert. A faint step sounded at the door of his cubby office and he lifted trouble-clouded eyes. Zona Hatch, the sheriff's daughter, stood there—a questioning look in her hazel eyes. Clay was suddenly conscious of the silence, knew the day's trading was over. "What is it, Zona?"

"I—I didn't see you leave and it was time to lock up, so . . ."

Maybe it was the fact that his own spirits were so low and needed bolstering. Whatever the reason, Buckalew saw Zona for the first time. She seemed always cheerful, this twenty-three-year-old daughter of the sheriff. Hardly a beauty by any standard, Zona was deeply tanned from habitual swimming in the Wallapai. She had pleasingly irregular features, slim boyish hands and dancing hazel eyes beneath fluffy chestnut hair. In spite of the hint of roguishness, hers was the steady, steely gaze of the desert—a mature looking upon of the facts of this world. It was a quality that had repelled frivolous and sensation-seeking youth. Town gossip branded Zona already an old maid, doomed to travel manless down the years.

Clay had put Zona to work at her request and against Ab Hatch's protest. He had been vaguely aware that she was an asset in the drygoods department; otherwise he hadn't noticed her. But now, admiring the freckle-nosed ornament she made in the doorway, he was poignantly reminded of his loneliness, the emptiness of his life. He said, "Sit down, Zona. Heard the news?"

She sat down, pleased. "News, Mister Clayton? You mean you've located that lost wagon of bolt goods?"

"I mean the news of the big silver strike

in the Trecabs. Crockett! In a few days this store won't be worth the lumber it took to build it. The *News* will fold like an accordion. My freight wagons will be working out of a ghost town."

She stared at him, her emotion plainly pity for him rather than any feeling about Rillito. "Buck—Mister Clayton, that will mean . . . ruin!"

"I'll be right back where I started, Zona." He tried to smile. "I guess that means locking horns with Crockett again." He sat staring at her, an ache inside him as two crystal tears rolled down her cheeks. She had called him by what she believed to be his first name. It comforted him when he needed comfort most. It had been long, so very long, since he had known anything like affection. Once, in the hurly-burly rush of youth, he hadn't missed it. But now. . . .

"We'll still have the county seat, Buck. That should hold the town together."

"Crockett will see we don't hold it long, with all the votes going to Trecab. As soon as he's strong enough, he'll call an election. I can't see any hope for Rillito."

Born in Prescott, Zona's father had brought her here as an infant. She had lived in Rillito all her life; it was home, and the full weight of the pending disaster now fell upon her and she buried her face in her hands, weeping silently.

Clay said, "Don't Zona . . . please." He went to her and lifted her and tilted up her face, catching the tears on his finger. She tried to smile and the effort tore at Clay's heart. He pulled her to him and kissed her hard, felt her arms slide around his neck and the fierce and hungry response of her lips.

"I—I've loved you so long, Buck," she whispered. "Ever since the first day you came here. I've hoped some day . . . you'd kiss me."

Emotions crowded Clay's mind, and foremost was the will to be entirely honest with this girl who was suddenly so important in his life. He caught her under the arms and sat her in the chair.

"Sit there," he commanded sternly, "and listen to me. There has never been any girl for me except you. And now that I've found you, I can't have you. I'm sorry I broke down and kissed you. Forget it, and I'll try to. I'll have nothing now to offer you and . . . well, I'm not Buck Clayton. I'm Clay Buckalew, wanted in New Mexico as the Mescalero Kid!"

She sat quietly, her hands folded, and let him talk. He told her of the land steal by Irrigated Estates, of the violence by those unable to reconcile their losses, culminating in the stage holdup in which two shotgun guards were slain, Leatherwood and his secretary desperately wounded.

"I'm living on borrowed time, Zona," he finished. "It would be unthinkable for me to drag a girl into the mess I've made of my life."

"Even if the girl wanted it?" she asked. "I don't care what you've been; if you are in trouble, I want to be close . . . to help. And that's what I'll do . . . starting now!" She bounced up excitedly, darted into the big trading room. Clay reached for her, missed and cried: "Zona . . . no!" Somehow he knew she would tell her father, in the belief he could help. Ah, thought Clay, had first of all his oath to uphold. The slamming of the outer door mocked him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Under the Gun

CLAY, moving through the darkening store to lock up, caught the movement on the awninged porch outside. A man turned the knob and pushed inside, a slender little man with Stetson-shadowed face. He halted, sensing Clay's presence. "You closed? I wanted crackers an' cheese for supper."

Clay gasped. "Ozark!" he shouted. "Ozark Wooten!" He cleared the interval at a leap, caught the mans' hand. "Where'n hell did you come from?"

"Clay Buckalew! I'm a son-ov-a-gun!"

They pumped a riotous handshake, flung their arms about one another, hugging, pummeling, shouting oaths of joy. Clay found himself shocked at the old-timer's thinness. When emotions had settled and they were back in the office with cigarettes going, Clay asked about that. Ozark looked embarrassed.

"Easy come, easy go," he said, shamefacedly. "Never got to spend a thin dime of my cut out of that stage job, an' I ain't exactly sorry. Holed up with some Injuns one night, over Jemez way. Traveled on after a spell an' when I opened my pack all it held was some copper conchas that I traded to a storekeeper fer a couple pounds uh cheese."

"Robbed you," Clay said darkly. "Didn't you go back?"

"Naw, I couldn't figger the percentage fer me. I couldn't uh found nothin' an' if I'd got tough with 'em they mighta knifed me. So I've bin driftin'. Done some hayin' near Phoenix. Rid round-up in the Bradshaw Mountains an' was hittin' fer the White Hills Mines when night ketched me here."

Clay told him all that had happened to him since they had parted after leaving Parson in the *paisano* village on Conejo Creek. In his turn, Ozark volunteered the startling news that Parson Devine had survived his buckshot wounds. A trailing posse had found him and returned him to Concho. After doc-

toring, he had been taken to Santa Fe, tried, convicted and given a twenty-year sentence to the New Mexico pen. "Last I heard," Ozark said, "he broke free. Dunno how or if they caught him."

They went to supper, then sat a long time over two-bit cigars. Half listening to Ozark's reminiscences, Clay's mind returned to the threatened ruin. The longer he considered it the more he felt he must join the rush to the Trecabs. "Ozark," he announced, "I'm sending you with money to buy a good claim up Trecab way. My only chance is a finish fight with Crockett. Let's see Matt McGuire, the banker."

They found McGuire at home, dejectedly appraising the news, torn between remaining or moving his establishment to Trecab City—a loss either way. For an hour they talked it over, then repaired to the bank where McGuire opened the vault and got Clay ten thousand in gold. And so they left him—a graying man in a gilded office, too fat for his banker's swivel chair. A man facing ruin, his assets anchored to a doomed town.

After helping Ozark secret the money in his saddle roll, Clay watched the old-timer ride away through the moonlight. Then, being weary, he went to his quarters. He was doffing his coat when a voice spoke to him. "Right at home in my place, eh, Buckalew?"

Clay turned. A scarred face leered at him over the leveled barrel of a gun. Clay said, "Parson!" It was a protest, not a greeting. Once it had been difficult to appease this man; now it would be impossible. Glittering eyes and a steady gun told Clay he was close to death as Parson took his revolver.

"Surprised, Clay? Thought you'd rob me an' leave my carcass to rot, eh? I cheated you, even if I did serve time payin' off fer you. Now I'm honin' to collect."

"You weren't robbed," Clay argued. "Your wife got your cut."

"Wife?" Parson sneered. "Milly? Hell!" he spat. "Allus whinin' fer me to go straight an' when I did, squattin' on that Concho ranch, she reneged and wouldn't come live with me. Where's she at?"

Clay knew he lied but argument could only make it worse. So he shielded Milly. "I don't know where she is," he said.

"No? Then how-come you're livin' here? I wouldn't put it past you to kill her for the store. Well, you're turnin' it over to me."

"That's no bargain. Folks are due to clear out for Trecab, leaving this no more than a ghost town."

"I know." Parson grinned, caressing his belted canteen. "Pays to listen, Clay. I now own the claim adjoinin' Crockett's Discovery."

"Good." Clay grinned. "What'll you take for it?"

"You?" scoffed Parson. "Too bad you got nothin' to buy with."

"Maybe I can sift something out of the wreckage."

"Not a chance. My price is everything you got. Store, money, newspaper, saloon an' freight business. Make 'em over to me an' walk out broke or they'll tote you out—in a box. Which'll it be, Buckalew?"

Clay's temper strained, but he forced himself to consider the reason rather than the demand. Owning a centrally located claim in the boom camp, knowing Rillito values must hit bedrock, still Parson wanted Clay's holdings. Why?

"You still make a poor bargain," Clay said evenly, "except for the cash. How you want it handled?"

"I got to head on in about a hour, so get the cash an' notarized deeds to yore properties inside that time. Can do?"

"I reckon. If we hurry, we'll find McGuire still in his bank. I left him—"

"I know." Parson tapped his canteen. "Heard you give Ol' Wooten ten thousand to buy a Trecab claim. He'll buy one—three by six. Get movin'."

He pocketed Clay's piece, herded his prisoner to the street. Buckalew glanced at the still-lighted bank, a hundred yards away, and knew in that brief interval he must make his move. His fortune was at stake. And Ozark's life, when Parson returned to Trecab. "Why," he asked, to kill time, "would you want to kill Ozark?"

"I'd have to, tuh get that money offa him. Yeah, an' to satify Jawbone an' Stumpy. Sure, they're in Trecab too. They sprung me. Crockett's Stumpy's cousin an' he saw us located nice an' central an' we're tied up with him. Whoever ain't fer him is ag'in' us. Step it up; yo're laggin'."

Clay obeyed, deeply thoughtful. The stage loot hadn't benefited Jawbone and Stumpy. Most of it probably had gone to prison guards to spring Parson. Now, smelling money, serving a ruthless man of growing power, they were fully indulging the lawlessness born under the leadership of the Mescalero Kid. They would show little mercy to the one man who obviously had profited.

CLAY sensed now the peril he had sent Ozark into. To help Ozark, he must do something about Devine—and quickly. He drew out tobacco and papers, built a cigarette, halted at the bank door, hoping Parson might pass him. But Parson jabbed him with the gun. "Open it! Step inside."

Clay's glance showed McGuire sitting beyond his open office door. Clay dropped the match and stepped inside. He saw McGuire lift his head, startled—then Buckalew faded

behind the panel fast and slammed it back.

Parson recoiled and fired through the door. His body followed the bullet and Clay slugged him, looped on a neck hold and clamped down on his gun hand. Parson clinched, struggling. Their feet shuffled as they strained. They tripped, went to the floor. Clay, having the purchase, brought Parson's hand down, lifted it, smashed it against the boards. Parson roared, trying vainly to shift his bruised knuckles. After several numbing blows, his hold gave. The gun left his grasp and Clay kicked it away. Clay loosed his hold, stunned Parson with a punch on the head and got to his feet.

Parson rose like a jack-in-a-box, eyes red. The will to destroy made his scarred face more terrible as he attacked, scorning Clay's gun in his own waistband. Clay met him, swinging.

Devine smashed a right to Clay's temple. Buckalew shook it off and drove him back with rocking rights and lefts. Parson's knee shot to the groin made Buckalew give ground. Sensing victory, Devine jerked Clay's gun. Clay's agony was passing and he charged the weapon. The flash blinded him. He felt the sting of powder on his cheek, the slap of lead above his ear. He hit Parson, shoulder on, drove the wind from him, chopped savagely at his forearm.

Devine dropped the gun and Clay seized him, heaved and tossed. Parson spun a pinwheel, arms and legs flying, and landed across a short counter between two pillars. The impact ripped the counter loose and the thing went over. Parson's head bumped a desk beyond the corner and he wound up half sitting, half reclining, his face a bloody mask.

Through the door charged Sheriff Hatch. He vaulted the wreckage, snapped handcuffs on Parson, straightend and glowered at Clay over the barrel of his gun.

"You, Clayton? What devilment is this?"

"The blackguards tried to rob my bank!" Matt McGuire screamed. On Hatch's face Clay read his knowledge of the truth. Zona had told. Hatch couldn't mask his contempt for an ex-outlaw, yet he did not proclaim it. Buckalew was grateful for that.

The sheriff said: "You'll sign a complaint, Matt?"

"You bet." McGuire's courage crept back. "Clayton lured me here, drew money and must have got the same combination by watching me work the dial. Lucky I didn't go back to bed."

Clay remained silent. If he spoke, he must reveal Parson and their earlier association. So he and Parson went to jail, where McGuire signed the complaint, and were lodged in adjoining cells. Hatch and the banker left. Silence settled. Parson, strangely, said nothing. His silence made things harder for Clay.

Through the small barred windows, Clay stared out at the street, where lanterns bobbed and men scurried about, packing wagons with supplies and household effects. The sight depressed Clay Buckalew. He wanted to yell, begging them to stay with Rillito. But he knew they wouldn't hear him, nor obey if they did.

An hour passed. Wagons were streaming from the town now. Up through their dust, a score of riders came swinging in from the east. Big Field Crockett rode ahead. Stumpy Reardon and Jawbone Cordis were at his flanks.

CHAPTER FIVE

Moonlight Raiders

HANDS gripping the bars, Clay recognized the three leaders in the moonlight, heard Parson's grunt of satisfaction, his glad shout. "Field! Stumpy! Jawbone! Here!"

His yell drowned in the roar of hoofs, Parson cursed while Clay tried to puzzle it out. Why were these boom camp men here? He watched the Trecab gents ride to the Big Casino, dismount and tie their ponies. McGuire came from the bank and they gathered about him, hearing the news from this weak man who fed on position. Convinced he was through in Rillito, McGuire was bidding for Crockett's invitation to establish his bank in Trecab.

The pow-wow ended and Crockett tolled off two men who came riding to the jail. They were hailed by Parson, looped their ropes about the bars and jerked them from their adobe footing. Parson wedged through, fell outside, dusted himself off and threw a curse at Clay.

"Behind bars," he yelled, "you're as good as in my pocket, you son of a dog. I'll settle with you later." Then he ran toward the street, outridden by the two horsemen.

Clay watched him join the others and hold their interest throughout a heavy argument. Before it was ended, Clay's attention was diverted by the slam of the outer door and the cell-block panel creaking open. Light boot-steps echoing in the corridor.

"Buck!" A woman's voice said.

"Zona!"

She moved swiftly to his cell and her fingers came through the bars to find his hand. Her faint perfume stirred him. "I'm sorry, Buck. I was too sure I could influence dad, but the stubborn old zealot would rather die than violate his oath."

"Don't worry, Zona. It was bound to come out, sooner or later. My unpleasantness at the bank made McGuire think—"

"I know. I heard all about it. You weren't robbing the bank?"

"Honest to God, I wasn't."

"I knew it was crazy, and your word's good enough for me. McGuire's trying for Crockett's favor and he'll press charges. You must leave here quickly. I brought dad's extra keys. I only hope to God I have the right one."

She squeezed his fingers reassuringly, then the keys rattled. Clay said, "About Crockett? Did you hear why he's brought his men?"

He didn't finish. Suddenly the town seemed to become hushed. Buckalew darted to the window and saw townsmen frozen on their wagons and along the walks. Down the street strode Crockett, Jawbone and Stumpy beside him, their men strung purposefully behind. All were stiff, ready, wary of the crowd.

Boot echoes struck into the jail and Zona paused at her key fitting. "What is it, Buck? What's happening?"

"Crockett's Trecab City men; they're turning this way."

"God," she breathed, and it was a prayer. "I must hurry. Why can't I find the right key?"

Clay sighed. "Relax. They're veering off, heading for the courthouse, looks like." They passed from his vision and directly an echoing thud of axe strokes jarred the jail wing. Wagon teams came wheeling in from the street. Crockett's bawled order: "Shoulder into that axe, Jawbone. We haven't got all night, you know."

Then came the sound of steel biting into oak. Splintering of wood. Suddenly Clay cried, "No, Ab! Keep back, you fool! They're too many for you!"

From her fruitless effort at the cell door, Zona said, "Ab? You mean dad?"

The sheriff's voice was her answer. "All right, boys! Break it up. Get drunk an' have fun, but no hell raisin'." He had come along the jail wall, stepepd clear and now stood directly under Clay, his feet wide planted, his scattergun cocked. He looked aside and growled: "Keep yore bill out, Clayton." Then: "I'm not fooling, Crockett. You can't vandalize Rillito. Back off, an' fast."

"You do the backin', Hatch." Crockett's voice reflected amused confidence. "We're not wishing to harm you, and won't, if you close your eyes. But we're taking the county records to Trecab in spite of hell. Rillito's through."

Hatch snorted. "You crazy damned fool. You think you can take any records from here till you've voted it, all legal an' proper. Hellfire, no! Get away from there an' take your riff-raff outa town. I'm counting three before I spray them steps with buck—"

Zona gave up her struggle with the keys and rushed outside. Clay darted to the cell door, found the keys dangling at the lock. One by one, he began trying them. Outside, the argument grew harsher. Ab was saying: "One . . . two . . ."

"Stop, dad!" Zona screamed it at her father, from the corner of the jail house. "You can't do it. No man can stop them alone!"

Clay found the right key. The bolt shot back, the door swung open. Racing down the corridor, Buckalew plunged into Ab's littered office, scanned the walls in the moonglow, looking for weapons. There were none. He jerked out the sheriff's desk drawers and found a stubby .41 Colt's. The cylinder was empty and he could find no shells for it. Desperately, he turned to shelves loaded with dusty books, papers and paraphernalia.

A gunshot outside. Hatch screamed and then Zona's terrified cry knifed into the jail. The girl's voice was drowned out immediately by gunfire and profane yells.

Cursing his empty-handedness, Clay quit the jail. A glance around the corner of the building showed him Zona crumpled over the body of her father. Beyond her, alert as catamounts guarding their den, were two Trecab men with cocked saddle guns. The wagons were backed up near the entrance and already men were straining at files and desks, books and boxes of records, loading them into the vehicles.

They had killed; they'd kill again and again to secure their objective. It would be suicide to challenge them unless somebody could rouse those fascinated and apathetic townsmen. Even as Clay sprinted toward the line of buildings on his left, keeping the courthouse between him and the Trecab guards, he found himself wondering why Crockett had engineered this illegal stroke, knowing that within the time prescribed by law he could have it anyway, without risk.

AT a run, Clay entered the rear of the Big Casino Saloon, one of his own profitable enterprises. Only the bartender was there and his face betrayed his tension. Clay said, "How many guns you got here?"

"Only the bar scattergun and a six-shooter belonging to Slim Dupuy, the gambler."

It was a sullen answer; and Clay held out his hand. "Give me the pistol and you take the shotgun and come on."

The man shook his head. "No. What you got in your mind's impossible. Crockett holds all the aces. I'd rather string my bets with him than against him. I ain't anxious to die an', what's more, I won't let you commit suicide even if you fire me. I aim to be welcome in Trecab an' get a job there, when Rillito blows up. Don't try to take them guns, Clayton; I'm warnin' yuh."

Clay stared into his eyes and saw the

determination there. He had trouble enough without making more, so he shrugged and went to the street. In the next half hour he tried with all the elequence at his command to jar the townsmen out of ther fear, away from their hope to salvage something from the wreckage—in Trecab.

Then, with a yell, the teamsters at the county hall cracked their whips and sent their teams away at a run, whirling out of the hall grounds and onto the road leading eastward toward Trecab. A moment later, Crockett, Jawbone and Stumpy flung themselves into the saddle, loosed wild, challenging coyote yips and roared from town, followed by their men, spurring hard.

A rattle of shots blazed from their ranks. Bullets thudded into buildings and then they were gone, and the echoes of their passing growing dim. And from the gutted county hall, a slow red glow grew and wisps of smoke boiled from the ruined doors, dissolving with ghostly magic in the moonglow.

Clay raised a cry even as he ran toward those two silent forms lying before the burning building. And strangely they answered him, those townsmen. Crockett's shadow was off them for the moment and a fraction of the old civic pride returned. There was a rush for the fire cart. The volunteer company answered the tocsin of the bell, made for their equipment and attacked the red monster that had accounted, from time to time, for every important town in the desert country.

And while they battled to save a building already as doomed and purposeless as ash, Clay knelt and lifted a limp, nerve-shocked girl and carried her to Rillito's one doctor—a rotund little man who worked, slept and lived on whiskey and did his indispensible business in spite of it. He stood now before his office in his night shirt, his jaw slack, his eyes bewildered as he tried to plumb the disturbance that had wakened him. But there was nothing vacuous about him when he glimpsed Zona.

"Inside," he said, and led the way, waddling. "The devilish ruffians have given her a fright—"

"They killed her father," Clay said.

The little man stopped short to turn up the lamp, pointed to the operating table and took time to swipe beads of sweat off his forehead. "I'm sorry. Ab was a good friend. Clayton, this land is a woman's Calvary. They carry the cross and they're nailed to it and—"

"You're dead right," Clay interrupted. "Do what you can for her, Doc, and tell her I'll be back when we get the fire under control."

He ducked out and the night wind stirred an eddy of dust on the street as he ran for the fire. The volunteers had it out when he got there. The reaction had set in as they stood about the looted hall and argued that it might have been better to have let it burn, to have let the town burn. It aroused a spark of ire in Clay.

"What kind of cattle are you?" he raged. "Or is it sheep? Yonder lies Ab Hatch who didn't give a damn except that this town had to be safeguarded. It was his town and he faced a murderous crowd, defying them while you stood about and watched him die. You make me ashamed of being a human being."

A big fellow stood forth, his eyes blazing, jaw jutting. "Don't talk to us like that, you—you jailbird!"

Clay landed flush on that chin, upended the man and dropped him kicking. He looked at the rest, as if daring them, then spat and walked out. He heard the swift rhythmical beat of pony's hoofs and saw the rider materialize through the moonfog. He heard the yell and his name repeated: "Clay! Clay!"

It was Ozark Wooten, back from Trecab City.

CHAPTER SIX

Call for Fighting Men

CLAY ran to the road to meet Ozark. The old fellow curbed his lathered mount, scrambled from the saddle and stood there heaving as if he had run the distance. His excitement was a tangible thing as he lowered his voice and croaked: "Clay, boy, Parson, Jawbone an' Stumpy is all in Trecab, sidin' Crockett!"

"I know it, Ozark. They just left here, after raidin' the courthouse and taking the county records. Didn't you meet them?"

"Them wagons? Sure I did. They hailed me an 'tried to head me off. Dunno what it was warned me, but I swung wide an' rid the spurs around 'em. They slung lead a-plenty but fortunate me or my hawss wasn't hit. The dirty devils. They'd uh left me fer the buzzards if they could. If I'd uh knowed what I know now, I'd uh unlimbered ol' Cookstove. So they taken the county seat to Trecab, eh? I ain't surprised."

"I am," Clay said. "What the devil did Crockett handle it that way for? In a matter of ninety days he could have had the whole thing legally."

"That's what you think," cackled the old-timer. "I wasn't in Trecab City very long, son, but long enough to find out a few important things. Crockett hit a glory hole of free milling silver an' ore that can be reduced in a mud furnace. But outside uh such rare finds, the ore body is low-grade Stephanite that won't hypo right. Shirttail an' shoestring miners ain't got a chance. In a few months

there won't be nobody around Trecab except miners workin' for some big outfit that kin put up a smelter. An' what would a smelter use fer fuel? Nope, Trecab's a bust, an' I get it straight from a assayer who's already figgerin' to skip. Why wouldn't Crockett steal the county seat? If he waits the legal time, he won't have a handful uh votes."

So that was it? It answered satisfactorily every question that had puzzled Clay. Crockett, better than anyone else unless it was the assayers, knew he had a white elephant. His only bet was to hang on in the hope he could interest big capital. If he could hold the town together until the mines became productive, his own interests—saloons, gambling houses, bawdy establishments, freight lines and mercantile stores— would keep him solvent, even prosperous. And what else was there but the business incidental to county governnment and the destruction of Rillito and assumption of its supply importance? A brave new hope blazed up in Clay as he answered these questions to his own satisfaction.

"Ozark," he said, grasping the old-timer's skinny árms, "Rillito ain't finished yet, unless the townsmen have gotten too fat an' overfed to fight. They looked like slugs while I was in jail an' Crockett was killing Ab Hatch, the sheriff. But the way they jumped in and put out the courthouse fire makes it look like there's a spark still burning. How about you? I can make it well worth your while."

Ozark's grin was wide in the moonlight. "You know me, son. I bin fightin' all my life an' no man kin say I've bin unhappy. I don't like the sound of this Crockett no better than I do Parson, Jawbone an' Stumpy. When do we start?"

"I'll see how the town feels about gettin' those records back," Clay said, and turned away.

Ozark called after him. "By the way, Clay. I passed six of yore wagons rollin' to'rds Trecab with supplies. The's a move on foot in the town to grab that stuff fer Crockett, the minute it arrives. We just about got time to overtake 'em before they hit the camp."

"Thanks!" Clay flung over his shoulder, and a new idea was born in his mind. Six wagons. Six drivers and twelve swampers, all fighting men. Fearful and apathetic townsmen didn't seem quite so important now. "Get some supper and a fresh horse at the Paladura Stables, Ozark. I'll meet you there."

Putting off his call for volunteers, Clay went again to the doctor's office where he found the medico half dazed and nursing a very black eye. The office was topsy turvy, reflecting a struggle. "What's the matter?" Clay snapped. "Where's Zona?"

Rage burned through the battered doctor. "She came out of it, Clayton, after I—er—administered a stimulant. She got up, declaring she was going after Crockett and kill him. I—I tried to restrain here but—well, maybe I administered too much stimulant."

"What did you give her?" Clay was a little astonished at the strength of the cold fingers that squeezed the blood from his heart. And at the thought that Zona Hatch was suddenly more important to him than Rillito and all his chance-won holdings. "What kind of a stimulant?"

"Whiskey," the medico growled. "Would I have any other?"

"How much did you give her?"

"Oh, not much. A stiff drink, that's all. Maybe as much as a water glass of old Bourbon. It couldn't hurt her and she needed it. But she's a wildcat, that girl. Temper like her old man. I couldn't reason with her."

Clay cursed him and strode out, breaking into a run for the stable. He found the hostler in his cubby, working on a bottle. The man hurriedly secreted the flask under the covers of his cot and stood up, his eyes wide as he sensed Clay's urgency.

"Did Zona Hatch take a horse out of here?"

"Zona Hatch? Yes sir, she did. Wanted the fastest animal I had. Saddled him herself 'cause she said I was too slow. Then she took my scattergun off the office wall and threatened me when I tried to take it away from her. Said she was going to kill a man."

"How long ago?"

"Fifteen, mebby twenty minutes ago. About the time the fire bell rang. Yes, that's it; the bell rang just as she was taking down the gun."

"Which way did she ride?"

"Out the back. After that, I dunno."

Depression gripped Clay. Zona, crazed with rage and grief, would be miles along the Trecab road, spurring desperately, hopelessly beyond overtaking. He thought of Parson, Jawbone and Stumpy and the score of hard-case followers of Crockett. They would all be high with Crockett's whiskey and past caring what violence they undertook after slaying Hatch. Splendidly mounted and wary of the back-trail, they would never permit Zona Hatch to get near Crockett. There would be shooting and . . .

SICK inside, Clay hurriedly threw a saddle on his horse and led it to the street. His shout rallied a number of men gathered before the still busy saloons. In clipped phrases, he outlined the situation, stressing the killing of Hatch, the peril facing Zona and the new lease accorded Rillito by the news fetched down by Ozark Wooten.

"That reprieve," he told them, "don't mean a thing unless we fight Crockett and beat him.

With the county seat in Trecab, he'll be able to stand aside and watch us die on the vine. Or, more probable, he'll send his hellions down here another night and take time to torch every building in town. That would be the last of Rillito and of us. How many are game to go after Crockett, hit him in force and bring back those records?"

"Match lawlessness with lawnessness?" yelled someone. "I'm ag'in it. Let's take our troubles to Phoenix, charge Crockett with murder an' get a judgment returning the county seat to Rillito."

There were grumblings of assent, counter cries for immediate action to avenge the sheriff. Clay quieted them and said, "Phoenix is a long way off. Court action will cost money and take time. Who will testify against Crockett? Who here can swear he was with those men, or that his shot killed Ab? As for the county seat, possession is nine points of the law, and don't think Crockett will be neglecting his political fences down yonder. I'm telling you our only chance is to regain those records—now. Who rides with me?"

The townsmen were about evenly divided. When the goats were separated from the sheep, nineteen men had volunteered for the raid. Twenty, counting Ozark. Clay praised them, spoke a word of scorn for the laggards and turned the readying of the force over to Ozark.

"See that every man is properly mounted, Ozark, and equipped with weapons. Even if you have to break into Pritchard's Hardware Store. Pritchard's done well here and hasn't the guts to fight for his own business. I'm riding ahead to intercept Zona and halt our wagons. I'll meet you this side of Trecab City."

Ozark loosed a fighting rebel yell and led his warriors toward the stable. Clay rose to the saddle and raced out of Rillito. He rode like a demon, well knowing he had not the slightest chance of overtaking Zona, yet praying that he might.

Never was there so long a twenty-eight mile stretch. An hour passed, with the horse seeming to sense Clay's need and straining each nerve and muscle. The dusty road flowed beneath his hoofs. Creosote and cactus and paloverde drifted back with maddening slowness. And though he searched the road ahead with straining eyes, Clay saw nothing to hint of a pausing of the wagons or of conflict on the road.

Once, through the monotonous *click click* of hoofbeats he thought he heard the faint, far tremolo of gunshots and called on the game pony for more. The closing minutes of the second hour were ticking out when he saw the stalled wagons up ahead and reined down. They were his own, bound from Hackberry Station to Trecab with supplies for small independent mine holders who were already in revolt against Crockett's domination.

Clay found his men giving first aid to one of their number who had a bullet hole through one leg. They had been overtaken by hard-driven lighter wagons outridden by horsemen who opened fire without warning. They pointed out a drab shape blending with the earth in the shade of a gnarled juniper.

"We was ketched foul," explained the wagon boss, "but we got in our licks. Nailed one of the treacherous sons; he's lyin' yonder. We was just discussin' what to do when you rode up. Reckon we better go on in as planned?"

"We'll go in," Clay said, "but first we wait till the others come along. Tonight decides which town dies—Rillito or Trecab."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fortunes of Battle

UNDER a westering moon, Clay's six two-wagon freight outfits came rumbling into Trecab City, the drivers letting the mules take their own pace, the swampers stretched out atop the loads with all the appearance of men sound asleep. The town—a long single street, with twin lines of tent houses, board shacks, stores and saloons—lay in the depths of twisting Yucca Gulch. Nor was there any sleep this night for the denizens of the boom metropolis. Their coup had been successful; the records of Wallapai County probably rested safely and under guard in the long tent garishly signed: "Courthouse." Trecab was noisily toasting its new preeminence in hard, red liquor.

Up the street a yell rang out. "Yonder comes them damned Clayton wagons! Kick them buckskinners off an' take over!"

Answering shouts came from here and there and men came running, guns in their hands. A line ranged before the lead wagon and the hoarse voice of Jawbone Cordis rolled along the street. "Haul up, you jerkline monkeys! Git down offa them loads or do we blast you off?"

The prone swampers sat up, reaching for the brake ropes. Leathern shoes bit screechingly against steel tires and the teams halted. The lead jerkliner bawled, "What's the game, boys?"

"You'll find out, soon enough. Hit the ground an' damned quick!"

The driver called resignedly: "Your guns carry powerful authority, gents," and he leaped from the box. All along the line of wagons, the crew men quit their loads, dropping to the ground and losing themselves in the gloom between the wheels, under the heavily laden beds. It was the signal, that strident

rapping of a gun barrel against a leaning brake pole.

Across the tailgate of the second and third wagons tumbled fighting men who had left their ponies tied, miles out along the Rillito Road. Their bridges had been burned behind them. Perhaps they were facing death but there would be no compromise, no surrender. Since the thought had come to him first, Clay had pictured this moment. There had been no doubt then; there was none now, how Trecab City, Crockett and his lieutenants would receive this invasion. And that vision, too, was coming to pass in fact.

Poised there in the roadway, motionless, eyes widely discerning, hand on his gun grip, Buckalew saw Jawbone Cordis stiffen, his face twist, his great jaw jut pugnaciously. The mark of the brute was strongly on him in that moment. He swayed forward, cursing, and his gunhand lifted toward Clay, who drew and matched the move.

Gunblasts shuddered through Trecab. Jawbone rocked on his bootheels, his eyes growing wide with the fright any man must feel in the knowledge that he is mortally struck. He looked at his gun with some astonishment, as if wondering why it was suddenly so heavy. For a breathless moment he stood there, like a man in thought. Then he fell down in the dust.

The gulch was now a riot of mad men and vomiting red guns. Somewhere Ozark was loosing his rebel yell and whipping up his gun squad. The lead jerkliner, in command of seventeen partners hired for their courage and Colt savvy, bawled his orders for attack. Buckalew, firing as he moved, directed the third squad toward the north walk and those who already formed to oppose him from the doorways. The triple roar of their volleys rocketed through the chill of the early morning. Slugs smashing through fronts still wet with pitch, shattering windows, sweeping through saloons and gambling dives.

The scream of a woman ripped through the tumult. Inside a saloon a man cried piteously for help. Not all who felt the vengeful fury of Rillito this night would be guilty, or deserving of it, but their sin was in choosing Crockett's town and there was no broad chance for culling.

The attackers from Rillito were entering buildings, taking the fight to those firing at them. Clay, watching and listening for every shift of the tide, heard doors slamming at the rear and pivoted, facing the mouth of an alley as a group of Crockett partisans came charging to the street, guns spitting. The gods must have been smiling at Clay at that moment, for bullets pierced his clothes and plucked at him and whistled past, not one so much as breaking

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the skin. Clay gave it back, firing deliberately. A big fellow plunged at him, reeling headlong and awkward, falling almost at his feet. The rest spun about and retreated, bawling: "Where's Crockett? We gotta pull his irons from a fire he's scairt tuh buck?"

"He's likely in the Horn Silver Bar," a man raged. "Ogglin' that gal he fetched from Rillito."

It was the hint Clay had not even dared hope for. The fight was with the Rillito men now and the gulch gunmen were retreating, firing as they went up the drainage. Clay tagged along, shouting to locate his old side partner of outlaw days. "Ozark!"

"Here!" yelled the old-timer. "Fer cripes sake, don't stop me now while I got 'em busted into fragments. What yuh want?"

"Where's the Horn Silver Bar?"

"Up the next bend, mebbyso a hundred yards. Why? What's there?"

Clay broke into a sprint along the awning-shaded walk, his muscles like braided wire, a chill stream running along his nerves. The street, empty now save for skulking figures against the fronts, stretched before him. The moon hung low in the west and intervening ridges began to plunge the gulch into deep gloom. Across from him, Ozark led his warriors against a nest of gun-slingers in a dance hall, smashing down the door, ripping out the sash, swarming inside with savage shrilling and a continuous roar of gunfire.

Somebody up ahead raked the street and the walk where the Rillito warriors entered the hall. Clay could see the flash of the rifle, hear the measured rocking of the lever. Clay threw himself forward, raking that window with a flurry of shots. He continued on and found the rifleman sagging over a sill, his shoulders sodden with blood.

"Finished," he moaned, as Clay tipped his head back. "Dusted through the lights. Lemme die in peace, can't yuh?"

It was Stumpy Reardon, to whom Clay had more than once owed his safety, even his life. Regret touched him and a will to beg the broad little man's forgiveness. But Stumpy was past understanding; he was slipping fast. Clay let the man's head down on the sill.

"Sorry it had to be me, Stumpy," he murmured. "I reckon it took more of a man than you were to pay off a debt without fallin' into bad habits. I hope there's a better deal for you in Shadow Land. Adios, pardner."

HE TOOK Stumpy's pistol and continued up the street. Behind him the smash of battle was lessening as Crockett's resistance became hopelessly divided between flying columns of merciless Rillito men. It didn't bring

Clay much peace of mind. His flanks were unprotected now, his front an untapped reservoir of Trecab power. Still he moved forward toward the sprawling stone building, still incomplete, with the angled double sign, HORN SILVER, topping it.

Across an unshadowed stretch of walk he broke and a gunflash licked at him from the corner of the Horn Silver. Clay paused, alert to both sides, as a man in black broadcloth and flat-crowned hat burst from the shadows, firing as he came. Clay felt the sting of lead, steeled himself and aimed with terrible deliberateness. He had no sense of squeezing the trigger, though he must have done so. His gun bucked and the thin man in black lunged, swore, clawed at Clay's front. But there was no strength in his fingers and he went down, his nose on the walk, his head between Clay's feet.

Clay stepped over him and ran on. Light splashed from the windows of the Horn Silver Bar and Clay smashed through the swing doors, his pistol held before him. The long barroom was empty save for a Mexican and one bartender. Both held their hands above their heads.

"Where's Crockett?"

The bartender's lips moved but no sound came and his head jerked toward a door at the rear.

"Keep your hands where they are and you won't get hurt." Buckalew strode toward the rear.

There was a light in the back room; Clay could see the glow of it along the threshold. As he neared, that light went out and Clay paused. "Come out, Crockett!" he called. No sound answered him and chill needles pricked his flesh. "All right," he said. "I'm coming after you."

He drove his boot into the panel and a shot passed through, narrowly missing him. He kicked again and again and the door smashed open. Another shot split the aperture but Clay had faded aside and was unharmed and fully possessed save for the burning flesh wound above his hip—mark of that first bushwhack shot of the man guarding the Horn Silver Bar.

From the depths of the dark room came Crockett's voice, "Coming in, Buckalew?"

"Don't, Buck . . . please!" Hopelessness was in Zona's voice. "He wants you to come in. He wants more than anything to kill you."

"He's going to get his chance, Zona. You all right? Has he harmed you?"

"No, no. Keep away, Buck. Wait, for heaven's sake."

Clay glanced over his shoulder as he replaced the empties in his gun. The two men at the bar were still elevating, hearkening to

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the focus of battle drift along the street toward them. Clay snapped the loading gate shut, stooped and lunged across the threshold, hurling himself violently to the right and around the door to what he had believed would be protecting darkness. Strangely, no gunshot sounded, no winging bullets sought out his twisting course.

Straighening, he found himself in a rosy glow, a mixture of reflected light from the barroom and the slanting rays of the sinking moon, striking over a lateral ridge of the Trecabs and squarely into the window. In this pale effulgence, he saw Crockett in the corner, holding Zona before him, his gun jutting from under her arm. The man's scornful laughter echoed through the room.

"Now that you're in, Buckalew, what you going to do? This is the new deal I promised you. You can't win it. You'll not leave this room alive unless you play your cards my way."

"What way is that, Crockett?"

"You'll order your men out of here when they come. Then, when the sign is right, you and the girl and I will ride out of Trecab. If any play is made at me, I'll damn well kill you both."

"You flatter me, Crockett. If you think I could stop the Rillito men, after what they saw you do yonder, you're crazy. Think up another one."

"That's just too bad . . . for you," the Trecab boss said, and he fell silent and the gun in his hand didn't speak and Clay wondered what held him. The man stared at him, hate smouldering in his dark eyes, all the harsh, domineering qualities of him plainly printed on his broad face. Yet, behind all that lay a studiousness, a curiosity, as if he tried to plumb Clay's soul for some winning quality that he himself had only needed to possess to triumph.

Clay, fairly under the gun, almost without a target, shifted his glance to the dead white oval of Zona's face. Their eyes met and locked and it was as if questions had been asked and the weather, "Buck, I'm in your way, but don't let that keep you from shooting. This man must be put out of the way. I shall struggle with him. Perhaps I can fix it so you have more of him to shoot at."

"If you do, I'll kill you," Crockett promised.

It was a challenge to the girl who came from a fighting, pioneer line. She seemed to coil in Crockett's grasp and explode in a striking, kicking, biting fury. The man held her with his strength, but Clay saw his eyes contract and wicked, reckless red rage flare in them.

TRY as he might, and though he held Zona easily, Crockett could not prevent her making good her purpose. Her violent efforts twisted him and the side of his chest was presented to Clay, who lifted his gun and sighted. The wicked joy that curled through Buckalew was blighted by a clamor from his conscience: *"If she twists back as you shoot, you'll kill her."*

Clay hesitated and there was a *click* behind him and a voice spoke through the crack at the door hinges. "Got the gun barrel on him, Crockett. Say the word an' I'll let him have it."

"Parson!" There was fierce joy in Crockett's cry, so fierce Clay knew instinctively the man had not willfully spared him. "Hold it till I get this girl out the window. The damned fool had me if he only had known it. I bluffed my hand, with an empty gun and no chance to reload with this fighting wildcat on my hands."

He was moving as he spoke and Zona, spent now, muttered, "Shoot, Buck. Shoot him."

Clay, ashamed that he had not dared what Zona had, shifted with Crockett's movement and fired, bracing himself for Parson's shot. But his target had vanished and he cut it too fine, clipping Crockett at the shoulder point. Behind Clay there was the smash of a violently opened door, the crash of a gun. Parson groaned, thudded against the wall and fell, his gun exploding from the floor. Ozark's yell was ear-splitting.

"One waitin' fer yuh, Clay, that won't do no more bushwhackin'. Never did like that man, don't now an' never will. Come on out, son." And when Clay gave no answer, fear edged the old-timer's call. "Clay, boy. Where you at?"

Clay didn't answer. Released from the shock of delivery from certain death, he leaped across the room. Crockett had kicked out the pane, lifted Zona through and Clay could hear him running through the night.

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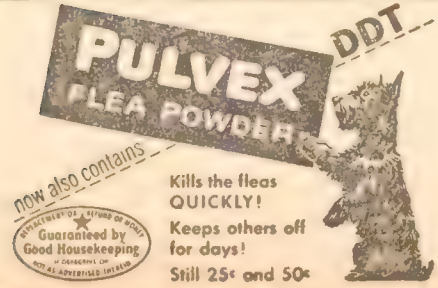

Zona called, "Buck! This way, Buck!"

It ended in a sharp cry, and he heard her no more, and he knew Crockett had hit her with the gun. Rage struck him as he cleared the sill and broke into a run. In that moment, strangely, he was thinking of his mother, broken with hard work, too often numbed with nameless fears. He had never seen her smile. This night, Zona had encountered more terror than any woman is expected to meet. He hoped she would not be like his mother had been before she sighed and gave up the struggle.

Clay saw Zona lying where Crockett had dropped her, but he didn't stop. The sound of the man's plunging boots came back to him; Crockett must also have heard Clay behind him. He ran only until his gun was six-full and then he plowed to a halt, turned and came charging back.

The night exploded before Clay's eyes, his revolver nose jabbed into flesh and exploded, the report muffled. Crockett's body hit him solidly, bore him down and he lay there beside flesh that gave off a low, gurgling moan and a rattling.

From the back window of the Horn Silver Bar came Ozark's questing cry. "Clay, boy! You out there?"

From the street came the cheering of men and a triumphant voice howling: "They're licked an' here's the wagons with the records in 'em. They never had time to unload 'em."

Clay realized, then, that the town was strangely hushed after the hell of gunplay, and he knew a feeling of pride as he got wearily to his feet. Vast fatigue seemed to overpower him, but suddenly that tiredness was gone and he was leaping toward a faint voice that called: "Buck! Buck!"

He saw Zona in a sitting posture and he ran blindly, filled with an irresistible urgency, a rash and fiery need to lift her and hold her and tell her things that overflowed and spilled from his heart.

THE END

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The Parson of Massacre Rancho

(Continued from page 107)

driven by a man named Jay Milner who was trailing south in the expectation of taking over Spanish Plaza and Gavin Wallace's cattle. The Apaches made Jay Milner's death a horror beside which the tortures of hell seemed mild by comparison. . . .

After the withdrawal of the Indians, Spanish Plaza sorrowfully counted its losses. Three men had been killed outright: McAllister, Alamo Torrey and another settler. A surgeon with the cavalry troop which arrived after the battle patched up the wounded.

In the days that followed the colonists, discouraged, talked of returning east. It was Gavin Wallace who argued them into staying in New Mexico.

"If you leave, you'll be forgetting the bravery of the fighting parson who brought you here," he told them. "You'll be refusing the great gift he gave you. He gave his life so you people could live on to make the Plaza into what he had planned for it and for you."

"That's true enough, but we'll never find a leader like McAllister," one man said.

"You don't need a leader," said Wallace impatiently. "It's time now you were standing on your own feet. But if you'll feel safer, I'll move my cow camp to the Plaza. Staying is the least you can do for McAllister."

"You'll join us?" put in a voice, Vincie McAllister's, and for the first time since the death of her father, the somberness of her eyes lightened.

"I'll join you," promised Gavin Wallace. "There's room for a thousand farms in the valley and room for a hundred ranches in the mountains. Room for us all. Yes, I'll move to the Plaza if you think you need looking after." He could have been talking about the settlers, but his eyes were telling Vincie McAllister that he was speaking to her alone. . . .

THE END

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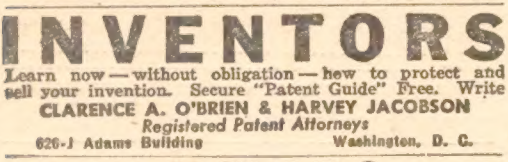
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UP THE TRAIL

"UP on the Liard, Corporal Raymond carries on with a bullet in his guts. Constable Mason runs patrol out of Dawson with a broken arm. Eskimos on the Rim have cut Sergeant Oliver to ribbons, and he's using those ribbons for arms and legs, and drinks his own blood in order to live. Those are the kind of men I want. . . ."

Those were the words used by Bull-Nose McGraw, district inspector of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, a man whose heart was as "big as a lump on a mosquito." McGraw is a minor character in Michael Oblinger's novel of Canadian law, "Too Damn' Tough to Die!" which is found elsewhere in this magazine.

But minor character or not, McGraw is a two-legged, two-fisted, iron-gutted symbol of the scarlet-coated mounties of days gone by. The fictional inspector is a monument to the men who rodded the law on the northern side of the Canadian line where, in the period from 1870 to 1880, only the presence of this mobile force prevented the lawlessness prevalent in United States mining camps from spreading into Canada on a gigantic scale.

The Mounted Police, like the American Rangers, were born in the blood-letting and chaos characteristic of an expanding nation. The Canadian Pacific Railroad had been completed in 1885, linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. But Blackfeet and Cree Indians, reckoning the railroad meant the destruction of their food supply—the buffalo herds—painted for war. Saskatchewan's half-breed settlers feared for their land plots and took as their leader a man named Louis Riel.

Back in 1873 the government, to prevent outrages and preserve the peace, had created the Northwest Mounted Police. Now the Mounties got their first honest-to-God baptism of fire. Riel's half-breeds attacked a police force commanded by a Major Crozier and when the firing ceased more than twelve Mounties were dead and twenty-five wounded.

A month later, however, the government squared the deal and nailed Lou Riel's hide to the barnyard door. He was hanged at Regina late in 1885.

On the desert sands of Arizona or the snow-blanketed, wind-swept tundras of the great North Country, a man needed brains in his head, lightning in his gun-hand and guts in his belly when he was the Frontier law.

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